

Portrait of a Representational Artist: James (Jim) Armstrong



Artist at work in Studio

James Armstrong, or Jim as he is better known, is a Tobagonian artist who started drawing and painting in his pre-teen years, following in the footsteps of his grandmother – Teacher Willie - whom he often observed preparing visual illustrations for her kindergarten classes. His creative flair became evident at an early age and was encouraged by those who saw the youngster at work. These early works were mainly pencil drawings, chalk on board, water colours, and household lacquer paintings on any surface that seemed inviting.

Noting his proclivity for art, Jim’s aunt – Eileen – who was also the Cultural Officer in Tobago, introduced him to the already established artist/designer – Edward (Eddie) Hernandez - with the admonition that, “the boy is ‘own-way’, but interested in art.” Eddie, who was instrumental in fashioning the emerging art movement in Tobago at the time, invited the youngster to join a small group of artists. This small group eventually formed themselves into the Tobago Art Group (TAG) in 1961, with Jim as a foundation member. He exhibited with the TAG annually and accumulated sufficient work to mount his first one-man exhibition at the Scarborough Library in 1965. Most of these works depicted the meanderings of daily life in Tobago and the rustic countryside which served as a fountain of inspiration for many artists. He often assisted Eddie with a number of public art projects, most notably the seascape mural on the façade of the then airport terminal building, which was in recognition of the royal visit for Independence in 1962.

While Jim had no formal training in art at the time, it was Eddie who encouraged him to explore his creative talents and to attempt the advanced level London University General Certification of Education



Young Jim preparing for an exhibition

(GCE) art exam, at which he was successful. It was also Eddie who pleaded the case to have Jim included in an art teachers’ workshop which was to be held in St. Ann’s, Port of Spain. The organizers initially noted that this youngster was still a teenager and also was not a teacher, for whom the workshop was specifically intended. M.P. Alladin, an artist and art lecturer, who had become familiar with Jim’s work, supported the request and he was allowed to participate.

Jim’s early style/s of painting may best be described as exploratory and non-specific. He was a “Romantic” in seeking to faithfully capture Tobago’s picturesque scenery and to give visual interpretation to its folklore and country life. The drills for the advance level GCE exams led to a series of more clinical

figurative and still-life drawings as seen, for example, in “Sketch of Lauretta,” (1961). His depictions soon shifted towards “social realism” which sought to interrogate and capture for posterity the daily happenings and distinctive culture that defined Tobago.



In the early 1960s Jim developed a quiet interest in a number of social issues and a more discernable resentment to the posturing of self-serving politics which seemed oblivious to the peculiarities of Tobago. His painting “Vote” (1962), sought to narrate the frenzy of the general elections in which the urgings of the protagonists subdued and discoloured the usually serene and green landscape of Tobago. “Scarborough Harbour” (1963) and “Cane Farmers” (1964) both offered renderings of historic Tobago in an uninformed painting style that was still searching for an identity. “Making Copra” (1965) sought to capture the drudgery of the work of estate workers and shows the emergence of some variation in style towards Impressionist symbolism and abstraction. In 1967 “Making Copra” was also exhibited at Expo 67, Montreal, Canada, as part of the Trinidad and Tobago contingent exhibition. “Old Highmoor” (1965) [not shown], was exhibited with the Trinidad and Tobago Art Society exhibition at Stoke, England, in 1966. He also exhibited in Brazil in 1966 as part of the Trinidad and Tobago contingent exhibition.



Vote; Oil, 1962



Scarborough Harbour; Oil, 1963

In retrospect, Jim describes his dominant style at the time as “indigenous impressionism” since he had not as yet been exposed to the works of the European Impressionists. Impressionism is the style that emerged to best characterize his work throughout the years, although, as will be seen, based on influences while in Africa, he has deviated and experimented from time to time. M.P. Alladin, who critiqued the annual exhibitions of TAG, once walked into an exhibition and indicated that he immediately observed Jim’s work ensconced at a distance. He explained that a discernable feature of Jim’s paintings was the “vitality of colour.”

Jim also dabbled in some clay sculpture and photography. The Tobago Division of Culture, which provided the studio space for TAG, below the current THA Assembly Hall, also provided a potters' wheel, kiln, sculpting equipment and materials, including glazes. His most notable clay sculpture was a bust of Abraham Lincoln, although there were several other pottery works and free formed pieces.



Making Copra; Oil, 1965 (Collection of the National Museum)

Despite this early success as an emerging artist, the prospects of pursuing art as a career in Tobago were not promising at that time and there was very little encouragement in this regard. Of the approximately 30 paintings and sculpture at his solo exhibition in 1965, he sold only one painting, "Cane Harvest" for \$87.00, which was well short of the asking price of \$200.00.



Harvest (Oil) 1964

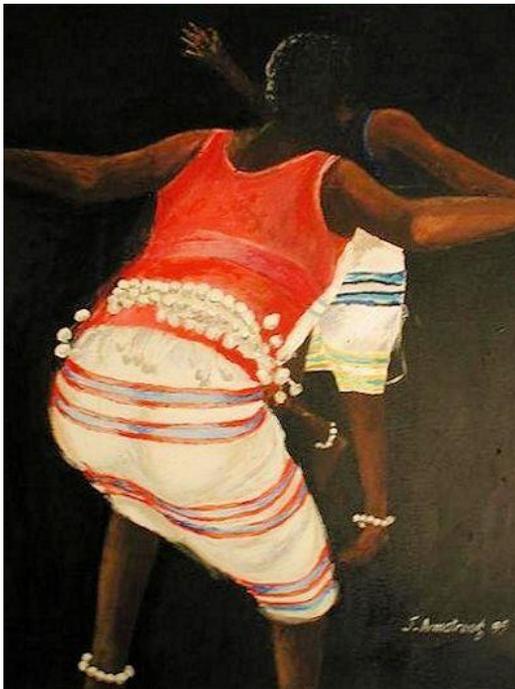
There really was no market for art in Tobago and the few pieces sold at exhibitions were bought by resident expatriates and tourists, which is why the exhibitions were always held during the “high season”, when tourists were around. His mentor, Eddie, however, was able to supplement his income with various applied design and commercial art jobs.

Jim therefore decided to pursue a career in design, which still would have allowed him creative expression. He left Tobago in 1967 and studied design at Ryerson University and Humber College in Toronto, Canada, graduating with honours. He was subsequently awarded a scholarship to the prestigious Parsons School of Design/New School of Social Research in New York, where he graduated in 1972 with honours in Environmental Design. This university had a somewhat split personality embracing art/design and socio-economic public policy – both radical in outlook. It was while at Parsons that Jim was most challenged to transform creativity into critical thinking for problem solving in the pursuit of social progress and environmental design solutions geared towards individual and community transformation. Unlike other conventional design institutions, Parsons had a global perspective in which students were immersed in transformative thinking, in addition to the basics of colour, form, space and composition. This creativity also morphed into a strain of rationalist critical thinking which contemplated possibilities for human endeavour and wellbeing. For Jim, the connection between art making as a conscious activity and its role in fashioning human development thinking emerged as a distinct interest. This idea seemed not far removed from the Gropius principles of the Bauhaus school of thought on design and functionalism; a concept which was a pillar of the design programme. Jim’s studio project for graduation was the radical transformation of a depressed Bronx, New York community, including detailed designs for a number of key complementary public installations.

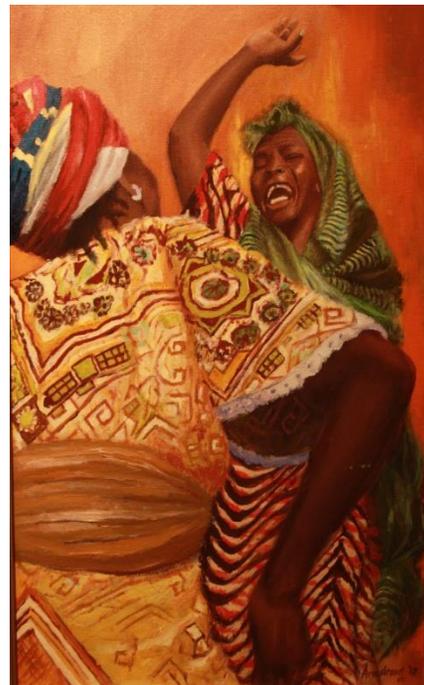
Following Parsons, he was awarded a Mellon Scholarship in 1972 to study at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture and Planning in New York, where he specialised in urban planning and design, with an emphasis on developing countries. As an Ivy League institution, the approach to education and training at the graduate level at Columbia was expansive, staid and structured. Unlike Parsons/New School, radical thinking seemed personal and extra-curricular, unless couched in the narrow confines of agreeable focused research. It was here that Jim developed an interest in Africa and was exposed to a significant amount of research work and students from the Continent.

While studying at Parsons and Columbia Jim also secured a job as an elevator operator at the National Arts Club, Gramercy Park, New York. This private members art club gave favourable consideration to employing art and architecture students. The Club was a residence and haven for the who’s who in the visual arts, architecture and theatre community in New York and the wider USA and each year mounted several exhibitions by its renowned artist members. Jim was often willingly co-opted to assist with the mounting of these exhibitions which exposed him to the superb works of some of the top artists in the USA. The famous American portrait painter, Raymond Kinstler, actually lived and painted on the premises at the time and observing his work was a great inspiration. Jim also used these opportunities to interrogate many of the residents and transient artists in order to glean a better appreciation of their varied works. He gained considerable experience in the curating and mounting of exhibitions.

While at Columbia he was also awarded a William Kinne travel scholarship which took him on his first trip to Africa in 1973. The research exercise was intended to study the structure and functionality of African communities. It was during this initial visit that he became fascinated with African art and dance, often “grounding” in the villages to absorb every detail of African culture. He recalled that on the occasion of his first morning in Africa, in a dorm at the sprawling Legon University Campus, he awoke to the pulsating sound of drums. Upon investigation, it turned out to be the resident dance company that practiced daily. This, he thought, must have been the source of those dance movements which he had observed in Tobago. He was fascinated by the flight of the human forms in unmistakable unison with the rhythm of the drumming and each other. The swiftness of movement and merging hues of form fitting fabric in the dimly lit studio, with streaks of light from narrow slits in the wall, created an almost strobe-light effect on the well-formed female bodies. Committing such images to canvas was an exciting prospect, notwithstanding the research which was intended to afford a broader understanding of culture and communities.



Ghanaian Dancers; Acrylic, 1996

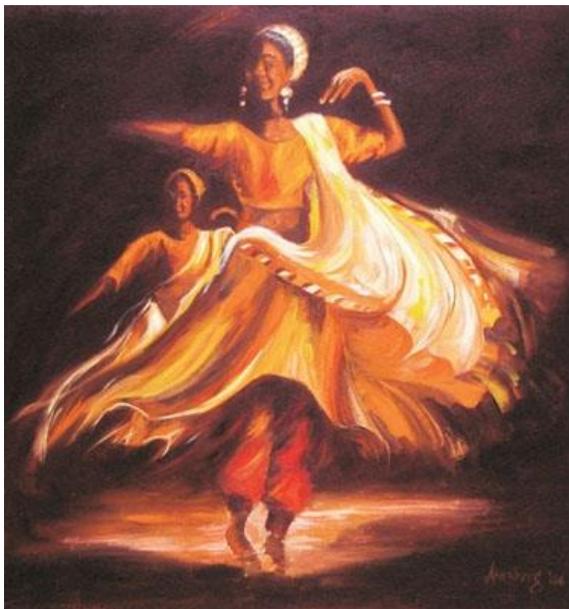


Celebration in the Village; Oil, 2007

He visited with these dancers each day for the duration of his stay in Legon and was able to return numerous times over several years, having visited Ghana on over two dozen occasions since 1973. The retention of African rituals/customs in the culture of Tobago, particularly in dance and music, aroused the curiosity of this artist immensely and attracted the application of his creativity through the years. The theme of dance and the capturing of movement remained with him and have featured repeatedly in his work. His experiments in this connection continue. The paintings “Ghanaian Dancers” (1996) and “Celebration in the Village” (2007) are illustrative of the style and gaiety of these dances.

The exposure and interest in African art also landed this artist an assignment as an adjunct lecturer in African art at the Columbia University Community Exchange Program. He had already taken courses in African art at Ryerson and Parsons. Upon graduation from Columbia in 1974, he worked in private practice for a short while and then joined the employ of the United Nations as a human settlements development planner and, fortuitously, was soon posted to Africa where he lived continuously for fifteen years and has roamed the Continent for over forty years. He was eventually able to visit 50 of the 54 countries on the Continent, always searching for meaning in the art, architecture and culture, and always making comparisons to his native Tobago. Throughout the years Jim continued to paint and exhibit works of art which reflected his deep interest in the juxtaposition of African and Caribbean cultures. He has an extensive collection of quality African art, some of which are featured on his website. His occasional sojourn into Asia – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh - expanded his interest in and a broader comparative analysis of inter-continental cultures as also mirrored in the culture of Trinidad and Tobago. What this artist observed is that much of what he observed abroad also resides in Trinidad and Tobago and had gone largely unnoticed.

His keen interest in art and culture has set him apart as one of the most prominent Impressionist



Indian Dancer; Oil, 2005 (Collection of the National Museum)

Representational artists in his country. After a distinguished career of 25 years at the United Nations, Jim took early retirement and returned to Trinidad and Tobago in 2000 to recommit a large part of his time to his art. His newer works have been included in various exhibitions for the celebrations of Independence, as well as being represented in Trinidad and Tobago contingent exhibitions at Carifesta in St. Kitts/Nevis, Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. He has exhibited regularly with the Art Society of Trinidad and Tobago; at exhibitions in Tobago, and his paintings are to be found at the National Museum and Art Gallery, as well as in numerous private collections locally and abroad.

The first one-man exhibition since his return was held in Tobago in 2002 as part of the Tobago Heritage Festival celebration, which highlighted aspects of the cultural heritage of Tobago, which, as indicated, is a theme reflected many times in his work. It was to his old friend, Eddie Hernandez, who was then the curator of the Tobago Museum that he turned for archival information on Tobago's music and dance forms. Eddie provided information on the history of the Tobago Speech Band and links to the "Tambrin" Band; the Brush Back; Reel and Jig; Bele; Heel and Toe and Bongo dances. The similarities between the African rituals and traditions, infused with colonial influences over the years, became clear and provided much fodder for creative interpretation on canvas. This curiosity led to an in-depth study of the historicity and social context of Tobago's heritage and the hybridization which emerged from various influences.



Tobago Jammers; Oil, 2002 being explained to Hon. Orville London, Chief Sec. THA



Tobago Heritage Dancer; Oil, 2002

His 2003 exhibition “Tobago to Africa and Back” was sponsored by the National Museum and Art Gallery, in association with the Tobago House of Assembly, through the Tobago Museum and Fine Art Centre. The exhibition opened in Tobago in June 2003 and moved to the National Museum and Art Gallery in July 2003. The exhibition represented a collection of over 40 years of his work since 1960, including various pieces done while working in Africa. That exhibition was also influenced by his extensive travel throughout Africa and highlighted some of his emerging experiments with texture and the use of African iconography. A couple pieces from that exhibition, “Ghanaian Dancer” (1995) and “Tobago Heritage Dancer” (2003) illustrate the artist’s continuing interest in the theme of dance/movement.

On reflection, Jim still felt that the representations did not adequately capture a sense of movement as he would have liked and being reminiscent of what he had experienced in Legon and other parts of Africa through the years. His “J’ouvert” (2003) shows signs of further experiments in Expressionism, reflective of the juxtaposition of positive and negative spaces as evident in some Makonde sculpture of Tanzania and Malawi in East Africa, and to some extent, the Bambara of Mali in the west. “J’ouvert” is also an experiment incorporating the human form at three scales. If one were to look carefully it will be noticed that if the forms of heads as shown were to be seen as negative space, the previous negative spaces form breasts at another scale, and repeats itself in profile at yet another scale.



J'ouvert; Acrylic, 2003

Interestingly, a number of critics have enquired whether such departure from earlier styles was influenced by western Expressionist painters, not being aware of the artist's sojourn into the crevices of Africa. More fittingly, the enquiry is really about the extent to which African art has influenced abstract expressionism in the West – a phenomenon which is yet to be fully explored in the annals of art history. It is now recognised that the abstraction of form in African art had some influence on the illustrious Picasso, who in turn influenced and transformed contemporary art of the West. In relation to Africa this abstraction was often termed "primitive" in the sense of being untrained, unsophisticated, backward and utilitarian, while in the West it has emerged as been "modernist" and "contemporary" - being of the highest form. It is this "primitivism" that Jim was also finding captivating and deserving of some treatment in his work.

His "Eclectic Cultural Influences" exhibition of 2005 focused on emblematic themes as mirrored in the local environment. Several works in this exhibition showed the ongoing experimentation with texture, such as: "Tassa," "Dance Gyul," "Last Lap" and "Masquerade of the Bobo." The shift towards further experiments in abstraction is also evident. However, most noticeable is the increased emphasis on the depiction of movement. The nuances are more towards technique as opposed to thematic consideration. The technique emphasized the softening of the edges of the forms and the meteoric trailing effect in the treatment of the body form and fabric. There is also more effective use of glazing techniques, often giving a merging effect of the principal form and the background. These experiments marked a significant shift Jim's style of painting. The response of patrons to the manner in which movement was captured was quite receptive with a rise in demand for such paintings by this artist. The capture of movement in dance was fast emerging as a distinctive and desirable trademark quality of his work.

His exhibition of 2008 – “Moods of a Mosaic Culture” – revealed the continued sensitivity to the cultural diversity to which this artist has been exposed and committed, a diversity which continues to fascinate his patrons.



Makonde Shetani



Yoruba



Akua Ba, Ashanti

The influence of African motifs and continuing experiments with texture are evident in “Shetani,” “Yoruba,” “Akua Ba,” “Senufu,” “Masks of the Motherland,” “Women of Africa,” “Congo,” and “Senufu..” “Shetani” in particular was inspired by time spent observing a colony of sculptors whom Jim encountered at a road junction in Malawi during a trip between Lilongwe and Blantyre.



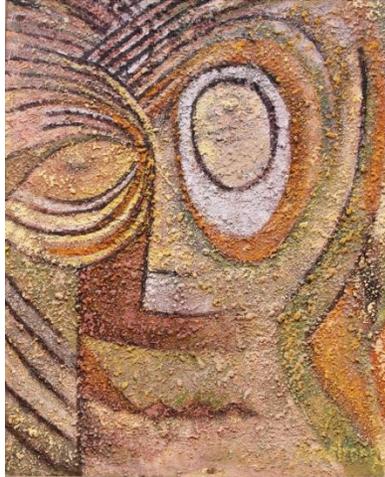
Yoruba 2



Masks of the Motherland



Women of Accra



Congo



Senufu

As a result of the increased interest for the works depicting texture and movement in his art, there was a backlog of requests for such paintings. Several of these paintings were booked before completion and the artist had to stop sales in order to accumulate sufficient pieces for his 2010 exhibition titled “The Art of Dance.” In preparation for this exhibition the artist obtained permission from various dance companies in Trinidad and Tobago, including the Metamorphosis Company and the Henderson Dance Company, as well as the usual Tobago Heritage Festival, to observe their dress rehearsals and various presentations. He was also able to return to Ghana for rejuvenation. Surprisingly, dancing still takes place in Legon, in the same room as many years earlier, except that it’s on fewer days per week. An interesting observation made by the artist is that while in Africa there is swiftness in the traditional dance movements; Caribbean dance actually has more elevated flight with an abundance of translucent fabric under varying light conditions. This is proving to be even more fascinating as shown in “Dance Rehearsals” (2009) and “Dancing the National Colours” (2009). “Wave Something” (2005) depicts a Trini-fête scene and illustrates the artist’s versatility with texture and motion.



Dance Rehearsal; Oil, 2009



Dancing in National Colours; Oil, 2009



Wave Something; Oil, 2005

However, not wishing to be pigeon-holed, and notwithstanding the increased demand for his now recognizable unique dance forms, his exhibition offering in 2011 was “Harambee” (which means pulling together in Swahili). The theme was influenced by a Tobago “Pulling [seine] Together” (2011) painting, which was the flagship piece of the exhibition. The exhibition revisited a variety of themes and styles but maintained the focus on the cultural diversity of Trinidad and Tobago. In particular, a number of still life oil paintings were included, harking back to the drawings of the 1960s.



Tambrin Ecstasy; Oil, 2011



Harambee – Pulling Together; Oil, 2011



After the Catch; Oil, 2010



Poverty is Hell; Oil, 2009



Reflections; Oil, 2011



Nude in Dining Room; Oil, 2011



Copper, Bronze, Fruits; Oil, 2011



While preparing for his 2014 exhibition, Jim's friend and mentor of over fifty years, Eddie Hernandez, passed away on 26 August 2013. Despite his illness for some time, Eddie had promised to be present for the opening of the exhibition but did not make it. Jim dedicated this exhibition as a "Tribute to Eddie." The flagship piece of the exhibition was a "Portrait of Eddie" which Jim painted sometime in the 1990's but was not previously exhibited. This exhibition highlights some of the latest renditions with movement, including the unique "Tobago Goat Race." Jim has gone on to advance his experiments with movement in Tobago Dance." "Belle Garden Dancer" was a commissioned piece. He continues to cement his reputation as a formidable representational artist.



Belle Garden Dancer; Oil 2013



Tobago Dance; Oil, 2013



Tobago Goat Race; Oil, 2013



The artist lecturing to primary school students on African Art and Culture

The artist is currently preparing for his 2015 offering which is scheduled for the second quarter of the year at the 101 Gallery in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. At intervals he can be caught lecturing to students and art teachers about his work. He also lectures to students about African art and culture using pieces from his private collection in the process.