

A Haitian Original

Luce Turnier delights in recounting the shock waves she sent through Port-au-Prince when she was a young painter at the Centre d'Art. But her association with the avant garde has been essential to the evolution of her art

By Donato Pietrodangelo

"YOU SEE, I DON'T ALWAYS feel like working. I'm not that fantastic. I want to be lazy, too, sometimes. My way to have discipline is to give an appointment to a model. I just put myself in the spot so I can't do anything else except wish that the model would die this morning so she wouldn't come." Laughing, Luce Turnier sits in a straight-backed chair amid the common clutter of an artist's study—stacks of unframed work, bits of a collage in progress, a half-finished portrait against the wall, wrinkled exhibition posters in a disarrayed stack. But Turnier is anything but common. She is a rare exception in a sea of artistic repetition.



all photos by Donato Pietrodangelo

Female, Haitian and a “modern” style painter who has studied and worked abroad, Turnier is an idiosyncrasy in the context of Haitian art. Since its emergence in the 1940’s, the serious art of Haiti has been characterized by just the opposite. It has been predominately male, “primitive” in style and mostly uninfluenced by the world outside Haiti. In spite of her differences—or perhaps because of them—Luce Turnier is one of the most accomplished and experienced Haitian artists living today.

As a 20-year-old student in 1944 at the Centre d’Art, the legendary Port-au-Prince gallery that spawned international recognition of Haiti’s extraordinary popular painters, Turnier’s colleagues were the Haitian masters: Philome Obin, Rigaud Benoit, Wilson Bigaud and Hector Hyppolite. “Painting is saleable now,” says Turnier. “If for some reason [emerging artists today] could not sell anymore, they would have to have another good reason to keep painting. . . . The one we had at the beginning, when DeWitt Peters opened the Centre d’Art, was that *we wanted to be painters*. We thought we were going to survive, but that we might not be well-known, and that we would never make money,” she explains in English laced with a strong French accent.

Born in Jacmel, Haiti, in 1924, Turnier now lives in Pétionville in the suburban hills above Port-au-Prince. Today, her golden skin, youthful face and animated exuberance belie the fact that she is over 60. In her screened porch studio, filled with a morning breeze and the nuance of natural light, Turnier talks about her career—the struggles, triumphs and dreams, the rewards and complexities of her uniqueness.

“At the beginning, in Haiti, I used to work a lot because I had nothing else to do. . . . I made progress, but it was not because I knew I had to work to grow. It

was because I didn’t know what to do with myself,” she recounts.

The work paid off. In 1946 Turnier made her international debut at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris in a group exhibition organized by UNESCO. But in some ways the triumph was bittersweet. Reviews of the exhibit raved about the “primitives” from Haiti such as Hyppolite. Turnier, whose style could be loosely categorized as “modern,” was overshadowed. Her talent was acknowledged, but her nonprimitive style denied Turnier the acclaim and worldwide recognition received by her colleagues from the Centre d’Art.

After the UNESCO exhibition, Turnier never looked back. In 1948 she was awarded a fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation and studied for a year in New York City. In 1950 she received a fellowship from the Institut Français and spent the next five years studying at L’Académie de la Grande Chaumier in Paris. She exhibited widely in Paris and Germany and, in 1955, had a major solo exhibition at the Pan American Union in Washington, D.C. When the fellowship ended, Turnier returned to Haiti, where she lived intermittently until she relocated in Paris in 1960. Turnier did not return to her native country for 17 years.

Married and divorced twice, and having two daughters, Turnier lived on the edge of desperate poverty in France. But she continued to produce, and her art continued to grow, as did her reputation. She was widely exhibited in New York, Paris and throughout the world. At the same time, however, she had become increasingly separated from what was considered the mainstream of Haitian art. Turnier describes the period as rife with pain and unhappiness, but also as a time when she produced her best work. In France, Turnier says, she developed the drive she believes



essential to artistic growth and development.

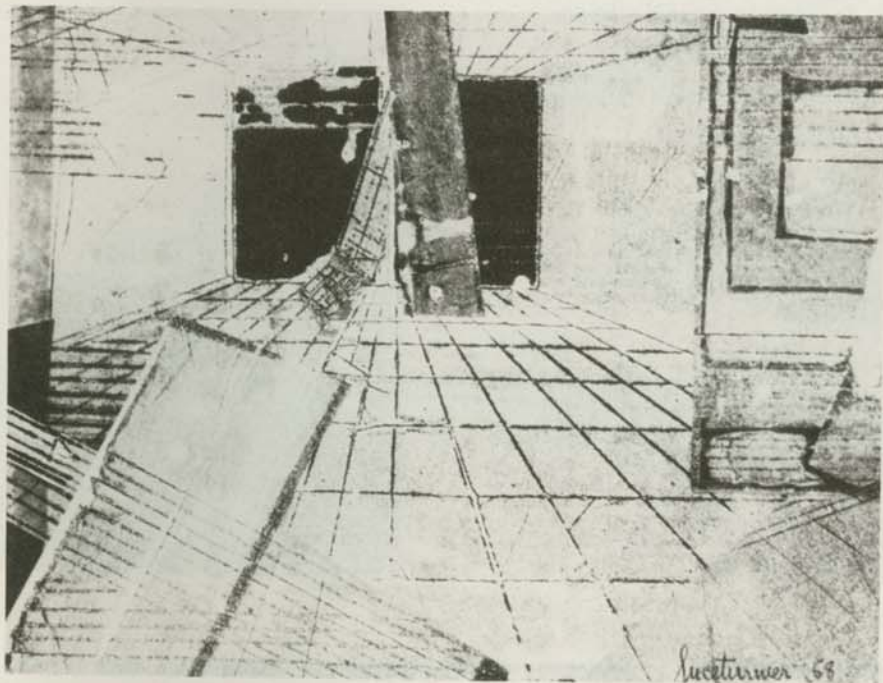
“There are some things that the Haitian artist doesn’t have. . . like the need to work just for working. Regardless if you are selling or not, you have to work to make progress. To do something nice you have to work—to grow,” she says emphatically. “I learned that in France. . . . I learned that one *has to work*. Discipline—that’s what I learned.”

Luce Turnier is known for her candor and her independence. Speaking of her earlier years in Port-au-Prince, she delights in recounting the shock waves she sent through the city by her audacity. She recalls the scandal she created by being the first woman to wear trousers in public near the Centre d’Art. She tells of the reputation she was developing—and the family disapproval—because of the late hours she kept. But her actions weren’t done to shock. To her they were essential to the evolution of her art.

“When the Cuban painters came—Carlos Enríquez and others—we used to stay out until two in the morning and sit in front of a warm rum and soda and



Turnier's modern, abstract work, *below*, contrasts with Haiti's popular primitives. Painting by instinct rather than philosophy, Turnier also creates powerful portraits of black-skinned people, *left and far left*



talk. I know what I used to get from those talks. It was important," she says. "I feel sorry for those who don't have that today. Because before, at the Centre d'Art, all the painters knew each other. We used to stick together and live together and drink together and see each other every day." Turnier said this camaraderie was invaluable to her artistic development.

Turnier is evasive when asked to describe her work. "I don't have any concept or philosophy or anything like that. It's just instinct. I discover with my eyes and my feelings. That's what I work with." She draws on those feelings for her powerful portraits of black-skinned people which, in a portrait-filled gallery, stand out distinctively as Turniers. Through superb illustration and

a mastery of color, Turnier captures the gradation of tone from ebony to amber that makes up the faces of Haiti.

The same sensitivity is also present in the collages she began making during the years she lived in France. Turnier's inspiration: a fascination with the patterns made by ink from a mimeograph machine as it dripped onto paper when she worked in an office. With this concept, Turnier began making collages that were abstract configurations of pieces of paper. The earliest—perhaps reflecting the strain of the period—are solemn in stark black-and-white arrangements.

Today her collages are bold with color and alive with people. She has shown them in a solo exhibition at the Musée d'Art Haitien and has printed several as serigraphs. Though well received in her country and abroad, they are most often perceived as "un-Haitian."

What does the future hold for Turnier? "I have the ambition to get better and better, to keep up... You see, I'm worried now. I am [61]. I have strength, but I feel it is going down. That energy is being spent fighting for life, instead of using it for my work. I feel heartbroken about that—it's a vicious cycle," she explains, as she speaks almost painfully of health problems.

But her obsessive drive—and her sense of humor—keep her going on. Laughing, she jokes about her model getting sick or dying. The uncommon Haitian artist, in her common surroundings, has a wish not uncommon to most artists. "So many times I wish I could keep quiet somewhere, move very far away where I don't hear any cars. There I would make beautiful mass productions." Smiling, she adds, "I wish I could do that." □

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