



By Patricia Cleveland-Peck |



Our first Doliver Morain

It was a chance purchase which started it. Almost at the end of a trip to Grenada a couple of years ago we were taken by a friend to an art gallery just outside the capital, St George's. There we saw a selection of striking works but what appealed most strongly to us were the simple, naïve illustrations of Grenadian life. A few were on canvas but most seemed to have been painted on whatever was available – in one case a wooden door. We knew we'd never get that in our case, so settled for something smaller, also painted on wood. We paid \$US 50.00. It depicted a fisherman in a boat, the turquoise sea alive with bright orange fish, the sky filled with seabirds, with in one corner, a turtle. The artist was Doliver Morain.

When we got home we had it framed and hung it above our dining table and it is fair to say that it was a constant and joyous reminder of this delightful Caribbean island. It got me thinking how rarely the majority of holiday 'souvenirs' give this much pleasure, thus proving the value of a genuine works of art.

As we were planning to return to the island we bore this in mind and wondered if there was any way in which tourists could be encouraged to invest in genuine works of art rather than the ubiquitous Chinese tat on

sale wherever cruise ships dock. Further, we'd been told that although Doliver Morain was talented he, like many other artists on the island, lived very close to the breadline, at times even unable to afford paints. "His blue period ended suddenly..." we remembered the gallery owner saying telling us. "When he ran out of blue paint."



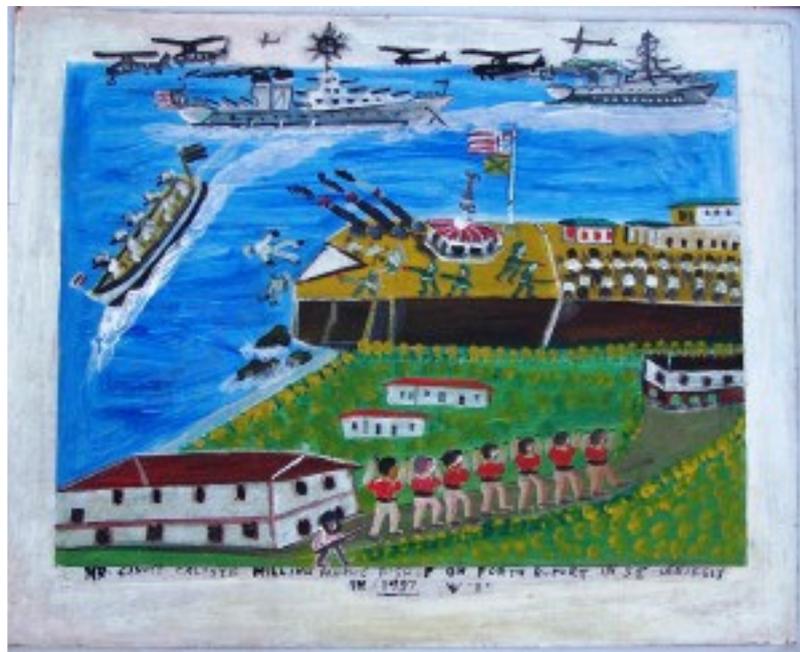
Doliver working on a fishing diptych

So on a recent visit, bearing gifts of paints and canvases, we set off on a mini-art tour in order to find out more about the lives of the artists and their works. For this we enlisted the help of Suelin Low Chew Tung, herself a very talented mixed-media artist and ex-Project Officer of the Grenada Arts Council who was able to fill us in about the background.

Grenada is not a wealthy island. It has suffered badly from hurricanes over the years, the last big one demolishing 90% of the nutmeg crop on which it relied. Now its economy depends on tourism and there is little left to spend on art. There is no corporate sponsorship, no government involvement by way of attendance at functions, nor is there a dedicated art college offering higher education with the result that most artists are self-taught.

While in most cases this route does not lead automatically to wealth and fame there is one example of a Grenadian folk artist who did achieve a measure of international recognition – Canute Caliste. Caliste who died in 2005 aged 91, lived all his life in a little wooden house at L'Esterre on the adjacent island of Carriacou, where amid chickens and children (he fathered 23...) he painted his naïve scenes of fishermen, mermaids and political events, the canvases often enhanced by his own

ill-spelled commentary. He gradually became known, a coffee table book of his work was published, his paintings were exhibited abroad and prices skyrocketed from a few dollars to thousands.



a work by Canute Caliste copyright Grenadian Arts Council permanent Collection

With Caliste in mind we decided to go first to Carriacou, which with Petit Martinique, forms the tri-island state of Grenada. We took the little 10-seater plane for a thrilling 20 minute flight across the sea and made our way to the museum in Hillsborough where some of Caliste's paintings are on show. We met his daughter Clemencia who is curator of the museum and she introduced us to her 21-year old artist nephew MacQuien Joseph, who showed us several of his paintings including an atmospheric portrayal of fishermen. We also met another artist from Lauriston, Alexis Crispin, known as "Q", whose paintings vividly depicted local life. We couldn't meet Kato Charles because she is in Canada but she is a Carriacouan folk artist who creates brightly coloured naïve paintings and weavings inspired by the island which she sells via the internet. So art is still very much alive on Carriacou.

Back on Grenada we were excited at the thought of actually meeting Doliver Morain, whose painting had given us such pleasure. He lives at Levera and the journey up from the capital took us up though some of the loveliest scenery imaginable. Twisty roads through forests, past waterfalls and over mountains brought us eventually to the extreme north of the island and the town of Sauteurs where we stopped to look at the Carib's Leap, a monument to the native tribe who, it is said, in

1651 threw themselves off the cliff and into the sea here to avoid being taken by the French.



Kato Charles

On the track on which Doliver lives we saw a sign, “Levera Museum of Art”. Caliste had a similarly confident – or ironic, notice – outside his house which said, “This way to the great artist.” Doliver’s museum, however, is just a motley open-air display along the roadside consisting of paintings, life size effigies (many with political overtones) with a quantity of his little tin animals made from waste metal hanging from the trees. He was there to greet us, smiling and highly appreciative of the paints we’d brought. A glance at the little shack just off the road confirmed that this 55-year old man, who had devoted his whole life to art, was indeed living on the edge – not just of the road – but of existence itself.

It was with relief that we learned that his star is slowly beginning to rise. Anne Farey, the co-owner of the nearby boutique hotel Petite Anse, who came with us, told us that his paintings are available in galleries in the capital, that she herself bought some which she has on display in the hotel and that she often takes guests to visit him, many of whom have purchased works directly from him.

After spending the night with Anne at the delightful Petite Anse, which overlooks the ocean, we returned the next day in the company of Suelin to find that Doliver had already painted a picture on one of the canvases we’d brought him! What I particularly loved however was a seascape,

complete with the shoal of fish which are almost a Doliver signature. This was painted on a large piece of corrugated iron, the corrugations adding effectively to the movement of the waves. Once again this was too big to pack, so we bought 2 more paintings and some tin animals before bidding Doliver good-bye and good luck.



Jackie Miller

Our next stop was to see Suelin's own one-man exhibition at Erik Johnson's Art Caribbean Gallery, the very place we'd bought our first Doliver painting. The title of the show was Emergence and we were bowled over by Suelin's semi-abstract paintings showing figures rising through gorgeous red, orange and golden tones. Suelin Low Chew Tung is a serious talent and a true crusader for art.

Back in St Georges we next met Jackie Miller who paints scenes on little off-cuts of mahogany, blue mahoe, white cedar and other local woods which his wife collects from a local carpenters. Jackie told us that he had drawn since he was seven years old painted since he was fourteen and that he too was self-taught. His pieces are charming miniature works of art, some only a few centimetres in size, depicting Grenadian cottages, beach scenes, people hanging out washing, flying kites and folk traditions, each with a neatly written title or explanation on the back. Jackie also produces hand-made greetings cards and we left

him busy painting a stock of jolly Caribbean Christmas cards depicting Father Christmas in the sunshine atop palm trees.

Then we were off across the island again passing palms, mango trees, wooden houses, tiny roadside rum shops, women washing clothes in the river and trucks selling fruit until we reached Plains where we were to meet another artist, Johah Mark. He also lives simply with his family surrounded by chickens and kittens. He was friendly and prepared us glasses of fresh juice before showing us his work. He paints traditional scenes in the naïve style (he showed us one depicting the Yab Yab – a folk ceremony) but his most amazing gift is the ability, after just a glance, to sketch an urban scene, a townscape, or a harbour and meticulously reproduce every architectural detail.



A work by Jonah Mark

As he put it, he was “an unfortunate child,” as he did not speak until he was nine years old and although now, with the unfailing support of his mother, he has recovered, he possibly suffered some condition which means his almost photographic memory can still store an image until he can draw it. Even as a child at school he showed great promise and in 1995 he won the first prize in the pencil category of the Grenada Arts Council Show. Since then he has exhibited with the GAC annually.

The Grenada Arts Council which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, was founded with the objective of highlighting and fostering visual arts in Grenada. It has sought opportunities for scholarships and further study abroad, sponsored artists attending conferences and every year it purchases a work for its Permanent Collection. An annual exhibition open to all Grenadian artists and artists resident in Grenada is held and

both Canute Caliste and another well known naïve artist, the late Elinus Cato exhibited there in the early days.



Suelin's "Emergence"

Not all who show there are naïve or folk artists for, although we were chiefly interested in this style, it was brought to our attention that there are talented artists in Grenada working in many styles and media. Oliver Benoit, president of the GAC produces important contemporary paintings as does Asher Mains who we met with GAC member, Victoria Slinger at the GAC Headquarters. Indeed in the last exhibition the range covered by the 139 items included naïve, contemporary and abstract paintings in oil, watercolour and acrylic on canvas, linen, paper and wood, together with carvings, ceramics, collage, jewellery and mixed media.

Later that day we visited Jim Rudin, proprietor of the Yellow Pui Gallery who knows as much as anyone about the milieu. He is friendly and informative and a visit to his gallery should be a first stop for anyone interested in Grenadian Art. The works of all the artists we'd met and many more are on sale here.

Our outlay on art was relatively small in cash terms but two more Doliver Morain paintings, three of his recycled tin animals and a

clutch of Jackie Miller's little wooden scenes (which actually make excellent gifts for children) will prove potent reminders of a fabulous island where in spite of difficulties, the art scene is alive and well.



Alexis Crispin, known as "Q",

So travellers, especially to poorer countries, I urge you to seek out genuine works of art. Artists are driven by a passionate desire to create and in order to do so some have to endure hardship. If you buy their work you provide not only needed cash but validation of a way of life – at the same time as gaining something of the essential spirit of the place to take home.

Places to buy works of art:

SAINT GEORGE'S CAPITAL: Young Street – Yellow Poui; Tikal; Art Fabrik;

SAINT GEORGE'S OUTSKIRTS: (5 mins from capital by car) Paddock/Belmont – Art Caribbean (Erik Johnson's gallery)

SAINT PATRICK: (1 hour from capital by car) Levera – Doliver Morain's gallery, Kato Charles Folk Art

