



Caribbean Art Forms

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What is an art form?

- Art forms represent the culture of a particular people. They give tangible expressions to feelings and ideas.

Nature and functions of art forms



- Art forms have long found a place in human existence and according to Aristotle, are agencies of human creation that separate man from the animals

- Art forms serve to satisfy the basic human instinct of harmony, balance and rhythm
- They help humans to experience the mysterious and explore their imagination
- Ritualistic and symbolic functions of culture are embodied in art forms
- They act as a means of communication, a social free zone (no censure); for propaganda; commercialism; activism and protest
- They are also used to measure human development – high culture (fine arts) vs low culture (popular arts)



Classification of art forms – The Literary Arts



- In the scholarship of the Caribbean several categories of art forms are recognized:
- What is now considered West Indian literature emerged around the 1950s when writers such as Samuel Selvon, V.S. Naipaul and George Lamming began to be published in the United Kingdom
- The BBC radio programme, Caribbean Voices featured poems and stories by Caribbean writers which were broadcast to the region. This helped to build an audience

Characteristics of Literary Arts



- One of the features of Caribbean literature is the generous use of the dialect, patois or creole to convey the authenticity of the Caribbean environment and experience. Noble Laureate writers such as Naipaul in “A House for Mr. Biswas” and “Miguel Street” switched between British English and the creole with astounding dexterity while St. Lucian born Derek Walcott conveyed powerful messages using poetry written exclusively in the dialect, forcing the reader to become acquainted with this new medium for literary expression.



Influences on and of West Indian literature

- Common themes in Caribbean literary expressions were slavery and colonialism, indentureship and migration and independence versus regional integration.
- West Indian Literature has influenced Caribbean society and culture in several ways, including the fostering of Caribbean identity and pride, cataloguing of our dialect or creole languages, re-examining our history and sociology, the recognition of issues relating to gender roles, Caribbean – global relations and the difficulty in establishing a common Caribbean identity, as well as the engendering of a new generation of Caribbean writers.



The Performing Arts

Music:

- Reggae is arguably one of the most popular music genres emanating from the Caribbean. A combination of mento, ska and rocksteady, its characteristic one-drop beat and spiritually conscious lyrics appeal to people of all walks of life. Its main proponent is Robert (Bob) Marley.
- Themes explored in reggae music are mainly of resistance to oppression, world peace and justice and a spiritual connection to and longing for Africa.

Music cont'd...



- Calypso: A fusion of soul, jazz and African beats, calypso started to gain international recognition in the 1950s when Harry Belafonte remade some classics such as 'Rum and Coca-Cola'. In the eighties, Arrow's "Ah feeling hot hot hot!" was internationalized and is still popular today. Main ambassadors of calypso are among others The Mighty Sparrow, Lord Kitchener Lord Nelson and Machel Montano.
- Like other genres, it has undergone changes so that newer forms such as soca, chutney and rapso compete with the 'original' forms for airplay.

Themes and Influences



- Besides the party songs characteristic of this genre, there have been notable calypsos ('social commentary') that marked junctures in our regional experience
- Dan is the Man in the Van (1963 – colonial education)
- Federation (1962 – the failed WI Federation)
- Victory Test Match (1950 – WI first win over England)
- How Many More Must Die (1985- South African apartheid)
- Rally round the West Indies (1993 – encouragement to a fledging WI cricket team)
- Haiti, I'm sorry (1988 – a tribute to the impoverished nation)

...on Caribbean society and culture



- The steelpan is inextricably linked to calypso and is the only acoustic instrument developed in the 20th century, contributing to our heritage and culture
- Influences of calypso can be seen in our attitude to sometimes trivialise issues relating to our politics, and other issues affecting our society
- The propensity to give 'picong' or to tease others as is practiced in the 'extempo' genre (kaiso)
- The calypso 'bard' is often seen as the messenger who tells about the goings on in the society
- Calypso is seen as a medium for social mobility especially in its soca incarnation where lucrative prizes and opportunities for recording contracts lure many young upstarts into the music industry



Other music genres

- Samba – Spanish/African influence (Cuba)
- Merengue – Spanish/African influence (Dominican Republic)
- Zouk – French/African influence (St. Lucia, Martinique, Dominica, Haiti, etc.)
- Chutney - a mixture of Bhojpuri music, and local music. Chutney music emerged mid-20th century and reached a peak of popularity during the 1980s. Initially lyrics were religious in nature and typically sung by females. Several sub-genres have developed.

Caribbean music genres are diverse, comprising syntheses of African, European, Indian and Indigenous influences, with the divisions not always well-defined.



Theatre

- Some famous plays have been performed throughout the region and beyond, including *The Dragon Can't Dance* but perhaps Jamaica can boast of the most thriving stage theatre industry. The style may be formal but many have incorporated African elements of drumming and call-and-response elements to reflect the Caribbean experience.
- Street theatre can be seen in some J'ouvert celebrations as well as 'pretty mas' presentations by some bandleaders such as Brian Mc Farlane. Story-telling by artistes like Paul Keens-Douglas have given the region characters such as Tanti Merle through his dramatic presentations.
- Recently T&T has established its own film school at its local university (UTT) in an effort to retain and promote local culture through the popular medium of film. The government's annual Secondary School Film Festival generates significant interest among the young aspiring film makers.

Dance

- In the Caribbean, dance forms range from the classical European and East Indian to the many hybrid forms that exist as a result of the fusion between European, African and other migrant groups.
- Most of the dance emanating from the Caribbean typify the colourful vibrancy of our people. Dance is usually seen as an accompaniment to other art forms such as singing and theatre.
- The struggle for recognition as a legitimate art form has been fraught with problems, however, thanks to the efforts of several outstanding individuals there has been an upsurge of interest among the youth.



The Visual Arts



- Artists who paint and sculpt abound throughout the region, however, those of Haiti are particularly outstanding for their use of painting, metal and woodwork and follow the three main 'schools' of painting and craft:

Cap-Haitien which cover the daily life in the city

Jacmel which features the steep mountains and bays of that coastal town

Saint-Soleil which is characterized by abstract human forms and heavily influenced by Voodoo symbolism

- Themes of the more popular Caribbean art pieces cover the topics above as well as those of cultural identity and diversity, and oppression and resistance to cultural imperialism and hegemony.
- Some notable artists include Pat Bishop and Carlisle Chang (T&T), Lennox Honychurch (Dominica), Edna Manley (Jamaica) and Jean Michel Basquiat (Haiti)

Culinary Arts



Caribbean culinary practices had two main characteristics:

- It used lots of herbs and spices for flavour
- It often utilized the poorer cuts of meat or fish

This is owing to the history of hardship that the Indigenous peoples, the enslaved Africans and the indentured workers had to endure. The result is the ability to turn simple ingredients into a unique, eclectic and tasty blend of Caribbean dishes.

Where certain migrant groups are present or where certain European groups settled, the dishes reflect these characteristics.



Examples of Caribbean Dishes

- Trinidad and Tobago – curried food, roti, rice the style of chunkaying etc, (East Indian)
- Jamaica - Okra, pigeon peas, taro root , plantain, ackee etc. (African)
- Guyana - Bok Choy, wantons etc. (Chinese)
- Dominica - Pepperpot, cassava paimon etc. (Amerindian)
- Barbados - Black Cake, tea etc. (English)
- Martinique - Peas in dishes (French)
- Puerto Rico - Pastels etc. (Spanish)

Festivals and Street Parties



- Caribbean festivals include Eid-ul-Fitr, Divali, Hosay, Garifuna Settlement Day, Orisha Ocean Festival alongside European traditional ones such as Christmas, Easter, All Saints etc. Many of these days have religious significance.
- Street parties echo back to the celebrations following emancipation and include J'ouvert and 'Pretty Mas' Carnival, and it is seen as a combination of theatre (re-enactments of riots etc.), dance and song, artistic expression in the form of costumes while interacting with the audience. These parties are some of the biggest tourist attractions in the Caribbean.



Human and Cultural Development via the Arts

- Besides the basic needs that the Arts satisfy (earlier in the presentation), there have been numerous studies linking the impact of music on human social growth and academic performance as well as its therapeutic benefits
- The Arts have also been known to promote social cohesion and bridge generational and economic gaps, e.g., Carnival's street parade brings the show to the people so that they do not have to pay to see it
- Artists have achieved successes when their work is internationally recognized e.g. Peter Minshall and Mungal Patasar and this also redounds to the region



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- The Arts give a productive outlet to many, easing stress and anxiety to both artist and audience
- It functions as a repository of the human experience and our particular cultural milieu in the Caribbean
- It connects the region, giving us the feeling of a collective belonging and shared experience



Questions

- Name two Caribbean singers that have enhanced our understanding of Caribbean society and culture
- List three genres of music that are influenced by the Africans, East Indians and the Spanish
- Give one reason why the Arts are necessary for human development in the Caribbean region.
- Identify three sub-categories of the Arts



The Contribution of Individuals

Rex Nettleford: Jamaican(1933-2010) –
dancer, poet, teacher, historian, public
speaker...

- Co-founder of the National Dance Theatre Company 1962
- Founder of Trade Union Educational Institute of the University College (UWI Jamaica)
- Strengthened the UWI Extra Mural Department, Mona
- Co-authored the seminal work on Rastafarianism
- Influential in the UNESCO slave Route Project
- Vice-Chancellor of UWI



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Martin Carter : Guyana (1927-1997) – poet and political activist

- Co-founder of the socialist, anti-colonial PPP led by Cheddi Jagan
- ‘Poems of Resistance’ catapulted him as a giant in the field of Caribbean Literature and political activism
- Recipient of the Order of Roraima (2nd highest national award of Guyana)



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Beryl McBurnie: Trinbagonian (1915-2000)-
dancer and choreographer

- Founder of The Little Carib Theatre
- Mentor to Derek Walcott, Andre Tanker, Andrew Beddoe and others
- Pioneer of Caribana Festival in Canada
- Teacher of generations of dancers
- Recipient of several local and regional awards including the Trinity Cross



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Louise Bennett-Coverley:(1919-2006)

Jamaica – poet, folklorist, writer, educator

- Taught generations of students at UWI Extra Mural Department
- Influenced artistes such as Paul Keens-Douglas
- Established the use of the creole as the ‘nation language’ of Jamaica through her works such as ‘Colonization in Reverse’
- Exposed Caribbean culture on a world stage through recordings such as, ‘Day dah Light’
- Recipient of several honours including regional and international Honorary Doctorates and the Order of Jamaica

Caribbean Arts and Popular Culture in the Diaspora

Notting Hill Carnival (UK since 1966)

- Europe's largest street festival attracting about a million participants
- Trinbagonians the driving force behind its establishment and continued organisation
- Display of Carnival culture including giant floats, masqueraders, a Queen Show, steelpan music and performance by Caribbean calypsonians
- Event which serves to unify Caribbean people while reaching out to the UK population. Despite prior reservations, the festival is now encouraged by the government and is one of the most anticipated events on UK's national calendar.



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Caribana (Canada since 1967)

- Main feature are the mas bands that compete with each other for prizes as well as performances by calypsonians from the Caribbean
- Well-organized event with government and private sponsorship
- Sometimes referred to as the largest street parade in North America



West Indian Day Parade

- Otherwise known as Brooklyn Carnival attracts from 1 – 2 million people
- A medium for tourists but also for the locals to enjoy the culture
- The event contains pretty mas, calypso music, a queen show etc.



Popular culture and the Arts in the Diaspora

- In addition to music, festival and theatre, cinema has had a significant impact on popular and literary culture in the contemporary Caribbean and beyond
- Cuban film has set consistently high standards both in quantity and quality, notably the work of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (*La muerte de un burócrata*) and Jamaican's Michael Thelwell (*The Harder They Come*, 1972) is considered as the movie that brought reggae to the world.
- Themes in the early 20th century focused on the tension between exile and return and living a nomadic life versus a locally rooted one. Now the focus has shifted to a celebration of the kaleidoscopic diversity that all these 'intra' and 'inter' actions of the region have produced and, ultimately, the central idea of 'Caribbeanness' as creolization.



Summary

- The term art form can be defined as the tangible representation of the human expression of creative imagination
- Popular culture – activities and products of human expression that are generally accepted by the mass of people
- Fine arts in Western thought refers to the (Eurocentric) view that this type of art deals with aesthetics and it's ranked according to its beauty
- Often it is problematic to try to separate fine arts and modern popular culture
- Caribbean art forms have both an aesthetic and applied value



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- Our art forms are an eclectic mixture of cultures and represent a form of creolization
- Themes addressed in our art forms focus primarily of resistance to oppression, a yearning for ancestral motherlands, various forms of spiritualism, a search for Caribbean identity and a reflection of the diversity and complexity of the region
- The role of arts in human development is essential to understanding its contribution to the region
- The Diaspora, which is an extension of our society has played a significant role in promoting and defining what is viewed as Caribbean arts and popular culture



Questions

- Why is it often difficult to separate 'fine arts' and popular culture?
- Identify two major themes that are addressed in Caribbean art forms.
- What do you understand by the term 'genre'?
- Identify two ways that Caribbean art forms have survived in the Diaspora.
- Identify two individuals who have contributed to the development of dance and literary arts in the Caribbean