

ALBERT HUIE & DORRELL



MIGRATION & EXCHANGE

# ALBERT HUIE

(1920-2010)

The following painting has a reasonable claim to be Jamaica's 1st post-colonial portrait. It was painted on 11th November 1942 by the largely self-taught Albert Huie, who had moved to Kingston in 1936 to pursue a career as an artist. From decorating ceramics on street stalls, to demanding an audience with the secretary of the Jamaican National Institute in 1937, his artistic rise over the next few years coincided with Jamaica's own rise from overseas dependency to a largely self-sufficient island, seeking independence in all its forms.

Huie attributed some of his early success to the 2nd World War and to the wealthy collectors who could no longer travel back and forth between Europe and the Caribbean. Jamaica's growing political independence might be explained by the same forces, resulting from the breakdown in communications between Britain and her distant colonies during the war.

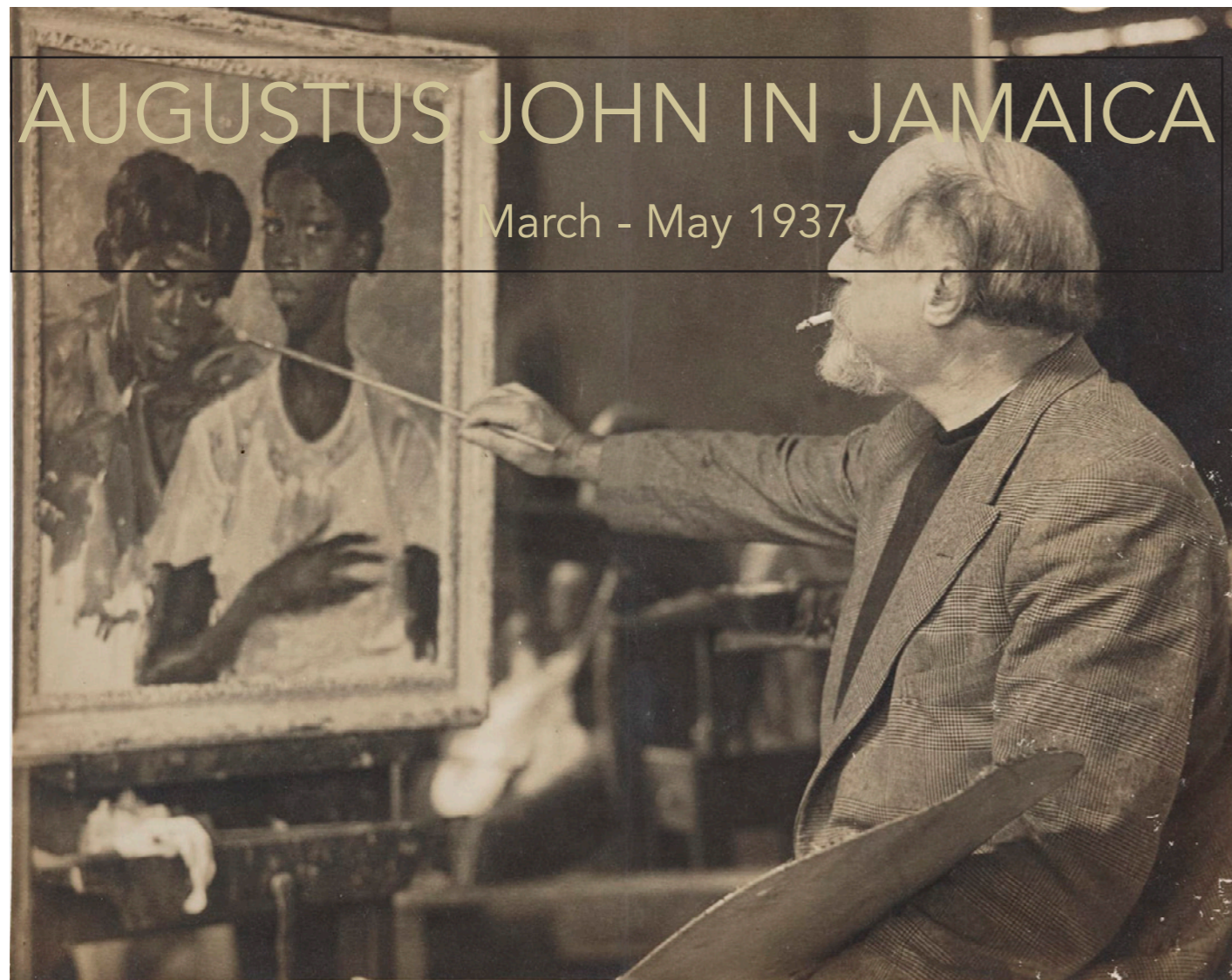
Dorrell, an adopted 15-year-old orphan typifies this rising self-confidence. Huie painted many portraits during these early years, but overwhelmingly they portray the affluent colonial classes. This is perhaps the only time where he was paid to paint a local orphan.

The portrait is painted on the coarse hessian canvas native to the island. It has likely been repurposed from one of the 'crocus' bags used across the Caribbean to carry flour, rice, sugar and other raw materials. Such bags are invariably associated with slavery and colonialism, with a long history of being recycled into anything from pillowcases and bedsheets - to uncomfortable, if hard wearing garments. It is a small but significant detail, with almost redemptive implications. Huie's ancestors might have spent their lives bearing the strains of these sacks, he would use them as a support for his portraits.

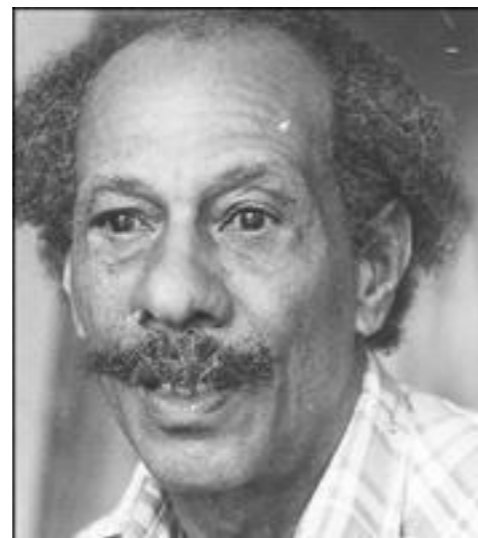


*"In the beginning I bought enamels in small tins from a hardware store and this was the medium I used to paint The Dancers after I had observed the scene in a downtown piano bar. Not long afterwards, I took this painting along with a couple others and my sketches, to the Institute of Jamaica to show them to Delves Molesworth. I was almost thrown out of the Institute. Mr. Molesworth himself interceded, looked at what I had brought to show him and expressed an interest. He invited me to his house and commissioned a portrait to be done of his wife."*

Albert Huie (1920-2010)



Albert Huie - National Library of Jamaica.



*"he [John] would go into a bar, drink rum... and observe. This character was out in the rays of sunlight studying the colours... Come to England, he told me: I have a house in Kent where I can put you up."*

Carl Abrahams (1913-2005)



"A Jamaican Girl" 1937 - Augustus John (1878-1961)  
Tate Britain



'The Blue Pitcher' - Albert Huie (1920-2010)  
(Prev. Cider House Galleries)

Augustus John arrived in Jamaica in March 1937 and remained for just 2 months. The trip has generally been seen from his side; Jamaica revitalised an ailing career and he returned to painting with a newfound purpose. What is now becoming clearer is the rousing effect that he had on the artistic life of the island.

John's dealings with Huie are difficult to ascertain, though the Jamaican art historian Veerle Poupeye describes how his "sensitive portraits of black Jamaican girls certainly inspired Albert Huie." We also know that John was instrumental at the same time in convincing the cartoonist Carl Abrahams (1911-2005) – a contemporary of Huie's - to pursue a career as a painter. Abrahams would later recall how John 'was the first to identify himself with us [the Jamaican painters]' and it is interesting that Huie revealed himself to the Jamaican National Institute in 1937 the year of John's visit.

This curious artistic exchange, where Jamaica inspired a famous painter in the twilight of his career, while he in turn encouraged talented painters struggling on the periphery of a large empire, must stand as one of the more interesting and unexplored chapters in the history of British Art.

Though John made great efforts to seek out the locals and to familiarise himself with the climate and scenery, the painter Neville Lewis (1895-1972) described how his pictures from this period were "magnificently drawn" but that "the skin was more or less a brown monochrome", lacking the "variety of reflections and highlights and changes of tone." Lewis, a disciple of John's, had grown up in South Africa, observing a varied population which included the indigenous Khoisan, Bantu who had migrated from central Africa, as well as Europeans, Malays and Indians.

The art historian Edward Lucie Smith, suggests that Huie had a similar "insight into the character of his sitters" and how the innumerable flicks of the brush which make-up his early works, capture the specific light of the Caribbean and how it sparkles on the surfaces it touches.

Huie's subjects were therefore "not the manifestation of an exotic tropical culture", but the direct portrayal of an island that he knew and understood in ways which no visiting artist could.

IN-COMING PASSENGERS				HUIE & DORRELL							
Name of Ship <b>BEGOÑA</b>				Date of Arrival							
Owner or Agent				Whence Arrived							
NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF BRITISH COMMONWEALTH AND IRISH REPUBLICAN PASSENGERS LANDED AT THE PORT											
(1) Names of passengers (Succinate feet)	(2) Class of Travel	(3) Port of Embarkation	(4) Sex (M or F)	(5) Date of Birth			(6) Married or Single (Widowed or divorced to be entered as single)	(7) Address in the United Kingdom	(8) Occupation (i.e. Profession, calling, or kind of work done rather than industry in which engaged)	(9) Country of which a citizen as shown on passport, (if citizen of U.K. and colonies state the country of issue of passport)	(10) Country last previous residence
				Adults of 12 years and over	Children between 1 and 12 years	Infants under 1 year					

Albert Huie's artistic odyssey in the years after painting Dorrell is astounding. He became the first Jamaican artist to hold a solo exhibition in 1943, and his 1944 scholarship to study in Canada threw him into contact with two of the earliest exponents of The Group of Seven, a national art movement that found European artistic norms unsuited to Canadian scenery. Huie applied a similar sentiment in his Jamaican landscapes, concluding there were "two dominant lights: the morning is silver, later, it is gold."

By 1947 the artistic cycle begun with John's visit to Jamaica was nearing completion; the Government of Jamaica sponsored a joint exhibition of Huie's work at Foyle's Gallery in London. His pictures were well received and Huie received a scholarship to study at the Leicester College of Art. Preferring to be in London, he wrote to his friend and mentor, Hender Delves Molesworth, now at the V&A, who helped

him to transfer to the Camberwell School of Art.

Dorrell Benjamin's more humble journey, saw him arrive in England at the end of the Windrush generation. He was born 24th June 1927 in Moores, Clarendon, Jamaica, to William Samuel Benjamin and an unknown mother. He was later adopted by Alfred John Buckley (1907-1991), who arrived in Jamaica in late 1937. The 1958, the passenger list of the Begoña describes him as a 'labourer' and gives an address at 18 Hutton Road, Handsworth, Birmingham. Little more can be found about his life in England, though subsequent records are often misspelt 'Darrell.' He seems to have remained in Birmingham, marrying in October 1961 and dying in the same city on 6th September 2002.



Farm, Haliburton 1940 - Franklin Carmichael (oil on hardboard)  
[McMichael Canadian Art Museum]



Retreat, Jamaica - Albert Huie (oil on hardboard)  
[Previously with Lusher Gallery]