**Interview of Dr. Michel Philippe Lerebours, Director and Conservator, Musée d’Art Haïtien du Collège Saint-Pierre, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. By Liesl B. Picard, Associate Director, Latin American and Caribbean Center, Florida International University, Miami, Florida. Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 2011.**

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Edited by Liesl B. Picard and Benjamin Hebblethwaite

Michel Philippe Lerebours: All those… here we have some paintings that have been really damaged.

Liesl Picard: Oh, these paintings that are here?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, most of them. They are badly damaged.

Liesl Picard: And to the point where they will not be able to be restored or…?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I hope. Is why we put them that way…

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So I’m talking with the Smithsonian now to see what they can do.

Liesl Picard: Oh, wonderful!

Michel Philippe Lerebours: You could see some pieces here.

Liesl Picard: And these were all damaged?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes. Everything we have here.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Okay, you can see what happened here. That’s not too bad.

Liesl Picard: Yeah, that it can be…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: We can save this.

Liesl Picard: And the museum was open at the time of the earthquake or it had just closed?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: No, just closed.

Liesl Picard: It was closed.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: We close at 4.

Liesl Picard: So and the earthquake was at 5. One hour.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Just before 5.

Liesl Picard: And where were you? Were you here in the museum?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I was in New York.

Liesl Picard: Oh, ugh. And how soon did you find out about the condition of your family and the

museum? Because it’s like two families really.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Oh, I keep in touch with the museum.

Liesl Picard: Very closely.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Very closely, I received photos two or three days after and I talked with people here so we knew exactly what was going on.

Liesl Picard: And so structurally, I mean I know that you lost windows…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: We have no structural problems.

Liesl Picard: No structural problems.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So far.

Liesl Picard: So engineers…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: But we have to put the whole, the walls down.

Liesl Picard: Oh, you do?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes.

Liesl Picard: So you’ve had an engineer come in?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes.

Liesl Picard: And they say structurally the building is sound?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes.

Liesl Picard: Oh my goodness. So this...

Michel Philippe Lerebours: That was the storage room, so you see the blocks…

Liesl Picard: Yeah.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Come from the top on the paintings.

Liesl Picard: Oh my gosh. So this is where all of your paintings that were not being hung were stored?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes.

Liesl Picard: And that wall, and then how long?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: It has been very difficult to go in.

Liesl Picard: Uh huh.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And take those paintings out.

Liesl Picard: Because you had to remove all of the rubble.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, it was not easy because everything was upside down and people were scared.

Liesl Picard: Right.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: To go in. Okay, but the…

Liesl Picard: And then, how many paintings were actually being housed in this area?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: In this area, we had about 900.

Liesl Picard: Oh my goodness, 900! And how large is your total permanent collection?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Most of the collection was there.

Liesl Picard: You have about 100 paintings out here?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah, about 100 here and in the back.

Liesl Picard: And then the rest?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes.

Liesl Picard: And so then, not only were the paintings in the storage room being exposed to the outside weather, the elements, the light, the heat, and then here you have…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: We have a part of the collection here.

Liesl Picard: Mmm. And some of these may be damaged? Or these are all in good condition?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah, no. There are, like this one is damaged.

Liesl Picard: Oh yeah, you can see.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Some of them are damaged.

Liesl Picard: Mmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: You see?

Liesl Picard: Oh. Mmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Those are pictures we have from the last exhibit. Because it was…

Liesl Picard: That you had in the museum.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: That was a special exhibit with a photo of the artist…

Liesl Picard: Beautiful.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And a painting.

Liesl Picard: By the artist.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: By the artist.

Liesl Picard: Beautiful. And did you have any paintings that you completely lost? Particularly the ones from some of the masters.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: We don’t know yet.

Liesl Picard: You don’t know yet. You’re still surveying.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes. We try to save everything so far.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm. Wow.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So that […]

Liesl Picard: Oh yeah, and even some sculptures here. Yeah, a fanal, right? That you would light a candle inside around the holidays, very delicate.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: You can see the blocks…

Liesl Picard: Oh yes.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Coming from the top here. I lost two paintings on the wall here.

Liesl Picard: Mmm. And did you have any issues with security? Or how did you maintain security?

A lot of the libraries we’re working with, the actual staff provided security of the buildings.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, that’s the only thing we can do and that has been the most difficult.

Liesl Picard: Because you depend on yourself and the…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Because, yes, because first we had the camp just in front of the museum.

Liesl Picard: Right.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So no control and the government decided to put a camp inside the museum, in the back.

Liesl Picard: In the parking area?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah, in the parking area.

Liesl Picard: And how long was that camp in place? ‘Cause it’s no longer there.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: They moved them last month.

Liesl Picard: Wow.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: We have a four big busses in the back.

Liesl Picard: That came.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And a lot of kids and sometimes they have food distribution here.

Liesl Picard: A lot of chaos, a lot of chaos.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: That has been crazy, crazy mess.

Liesl Picard: And what are… So then this is all of your technical equipment, all of your computers?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: No, that’s for the University.

Liesl Picard: Oh, this is for Saint Pierre, for the college?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah, no the college is over there.

Liesl Picard: The College is over there.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: It’s the University here.

Liesl Picard: Okay. So you’re providing safe storage for others also.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, because I mean they have been completely destroyed.

Liesl Picard: Yes, decimated, nothing there. Oh. Well, I do remember my first time coming into this museum and I come back every time I’m in Haiti and like I said, to have access to the paintings of the great Haitian masters whose works hang on these walls, or once hung on the walls, I, you know, it was a true gift and I know we’ll see it hanging there again.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, I hope so.

Liesl Picard: Thank you, thank you so much.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So we have a part of the paintings here.

Liesl Picard: Well, thank you for your work also.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: We put some here.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm. Oh, so you have more here?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: You can see.

Liesl Picard: Oh yes, more pieces. Hmm and do you have a registrar with the museum? You know at least all of the holdings and that is still intact?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, although now we don’t know.

Liesl Picard: Now you have to…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah. We have a list, a complete list of the works. Several […] [8:26]

Liesl Picard: And then this is the artisan shop which remains open?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes.

Liesl Picard: And also, I guess…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: We are not too…

Liesl Picard: Not a lot of inventory but you’re not too busy?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: No, it’s not too busy. There are no people coming in.

Liesl Picard: Yeah.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Except the…

Liesl Picard: But this is also an important symbol of presence and for security and being open and that the dedication to opening the museum again. It’s important not to…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: No. I don’t want to close.

Liesl Picard: Yes.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So we have a part of the collection in the back for show.

Liesl Picard: Some of the iron work.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah, those.

Liesl Picard: Oh, yes.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: But there’s nothing we can do.

Liesl Picard: There’s nothing you could do to repair this, to restore it.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So we have...

Liesl Picard: And additional pieces.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Most of the collection is here now.

Liesl Picard: Oh. It looks… so it’s very well organized, it’s shelved. It’s safe, but some of these pieces may also be in need of restoration?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: No.

Liesl Picard: These are all in good condition?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah, they are.

Liesl Picard: And there’s a fan, but you do have it exposed to open air but this is…very dedicated.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: […]

Liesl Picard: Thank you, thank you so much.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: […] to save what we can save.

Liesl Picard: Right.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Those paintings were there before.

Liesl Picard: Yes. And they never fell?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: No.

Liesl Picard: Thank goodness. And so are you receiving any funding or have you formally requested funding from the government?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: We have requested let me sit down because I cannot stay, I have a bad back.

Liesl Picard: Yeah.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Let’s see, we have a now, the Brazilian government signed a contract with us.

Liesl Picard: The Brazilian government signed a contract with the museum?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes. Yeah.

Liesl Picard: Ok.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: They will take care of the front part.

Liesl Picard: Wonderful.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes. I’m waiting now for a French association, *Les amis de la mémoire.* [?]

Liesl Picard: Uh huh.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: They will come and they promised to repair the back.

Liesl Picard: Area, for the storage?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes. No, the storage is for the Brazilian government.

Liesl Picard: Okay.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Everything we have, we have in the front.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Okay. The store…

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: and all, all the offices, they will take care of that. That’s the French association.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Last week I talked with the French Embassy.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: They are waiting for me to send…

Liesl Picard: Proposal or some kind of formal request.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes. A request for the four walls because there is no wall in the back

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: and on this side also.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: so we will be, we hope that everything will be done for that.

Liesl Picard: And what about the Haitian government’s response? I mean I know it’s extremely overtasked and has a lot on its plate.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah, we are a private museum, okay we have not been helped by the Haitian government.

Liesl Picard: Any government?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Any government.

Liesl Picard: It’s always been private, no government funding.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, the last one is, let me see. Mrs. Pierre-Louis, when she was there, gave us some money.

Liesl Picard: So you were saying, Madame Michelle Pierre-Louis?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah, tried to help us.

Liesl Picard: Yes.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I think that Mr. Olsen also…

Liesl Picard: From the Smithsonian and the former minister of culture.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm, mmm hmm. Well how did you manage to secure the support of the Brazilian government? Did they come to you or did you go to them?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: To the Brazilian…?

Liesl Picard: The Brazilian.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: They came to...

Liesl Picard: They came to you.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: A few days after.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: They asked me to send them pictures.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Of the museum so… and after that they sent Michelle here to see exactly what was to be done.

Liesl Picard: And they reacted very quickly.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Very quickly, I think they have been waiting for the new government.

Liesl Picard: Right.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: and […]

Liesl Picard: […]to come into office. Yes.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Next week, so I hope they will start working with this stuff after that. It wasn’t possible to work before.

Liesl Picard: Right. Because the space…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: The space was not…

Liesl Picard: Available, let’s say. The space was not available. Well, and you hope to open very soon?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I would like to open in December or January because I think in two or three months to repair…

Liesl Picard: Repair what needs to be repaired.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, I hope so.

Liesl Picard: Wonderful. So do I.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And I would like to have a special exhibit that day just artwork as seen by the Haitian artists.

Liesl Picard: Wonderful.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Just that.

Liesl Picard: Wonderful.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And the second exhibition with the all the damaged paintings.

Liesl Picard: To demonstrate.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, if they have been repaired by that time.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm, wonderful.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: The […]

Liesl Picard: Well thank you. Thank you very much.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So you ask me the question first from my book it’s not easy.

Liesl Picard: So this is the book, 1804 to 1980 and two volumes and you said it took you twelve years to write this book and I ask how you decided to become an art historian.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I was at the teacher’s school and at the end you have to write…

Liesl Picard: A thesis or…?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Not a thesis, that is something else... one hundred pages. And the director called me and I […] we need a, we want you to work on Haitian, or the story of Haitian paintings.

Liesl Picard: So you had no knowledge of art or Haitian painting?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: No, I had… At the teacher’s school, I was the… my main was French literature ok, but we had history of art.

Liesl Picard: Right, as an elective, as a supporting coursework.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes. And we had aesthetic also and just for…

Liesl Picard: Enrichment? Yes.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I was used to paint.

Liesl Picard: Hmm… What were the, you used to paint. What medium would you use and what..

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Oil.

Liesl Picard: You would use oil.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: That was when I was at school.

Liesl Picard: Right.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Ok, but after that I decided not to…

Liesl Picard: Pursue painting?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, and I have done the work and for that reason a few years after, I received a scholarship for Paris.

Liesl Picard: Uh huh.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Okay, and I went to the Sorbonne Institute of Art and Archaeology and at the end they asked me to write my thesis on Haitian art also. So I had a… so that was not easy, because I could not come to Haiti at that time. That was the Duvalier period so I had people from Haiti send me pictures. I went to all the libraries in Paris, in Washington, in New York. I went to London and it was very hard because there was no new books, nothing, so I had find out, because they were used to say that before 1845, there was nothing, so I had to…

Liesl Picard: You had to recreate…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Recreate…

Liesl Picard: The past.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: From the beginning.

Liesl Picard: And you had to recreate the past from Paris. From being outside of Haiti, even more complicated.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: The documentation on Haiti is mostly in France and the United States. You cannot work on the colonial period and the 19th century of Haiti if you don’t go to Paris.

Liesl Picard: Yeah, if you do not go to Paris.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, and for the second part of the 19th century and the 20th century, that’s Washington and New York.

Liesl Picard: Right.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So, in a way that was easier for me.

Liesl Picard: Mmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: But before the book has been published, I was back to Haiti so I could go to the Centre des Beaux-Arts.

Liesl Picard: Right.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And…

Liesl Picard: Access their resources, their holdings.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And work on that.

Liesl Picard: Did you ever get to a point when you were writing the book that you thought the project was too large to complete? I mean the time period that you cover is remarkable and given all of the challenges, you must have gone through periods…

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I was living at that time outside of Haiti.

Liesl Picard: Right, outside of Haiti.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I was in Canada. After Africa I went to Canada and when I left Montreal I lost everything.

Liesl Picard: You lost all of your writing?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, everything. All the work I have been working on for five years, gone.

Liesl Picard: Gone. How did you lose it? It got lost in the transportation and the?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I don’t know but I could not find them.

Liesl Picard: Oh!

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So I decided to…

Liesl Picard: Stop the project, give up?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: To stop, give up and my professor advised, one of them learned about that, Mr. Ray […]

Liesl Picard: Now this was your former professor at that time?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, he was the director of the institution.

Liesl Picard: Uh huh.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So he called me from Paris and said you are not going to drop that because I need it, so you are going to start again.

Liesl Picard: Start over.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I said no, he said you are going to and I…

Liesl Picard: Thank goodness he made that phone call.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And that was easier because I knew where to go.

Liesl Picard: You didn’t have to recreate Haiti’s history, you had to recreate your own history which was a little easier.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, so.

Liesl Picard: And you jumped right back into the project?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, because at that time I was living in New York.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Trying to buy some... and decided to start to work again.

Liesl Picard: And how did you feel when you completed it, when you made the last revision and you said “this is it, it’s a project that I have accomplished”?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I cannot tell you, I cannot tell you because I sent it to Paris

Liesl Picard: Okay.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: and they said oh. I don’t know what will happen.

Liesl Picard: You didn’t know how it would be received?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And when I went to Paris, I remember two or three years before I stopped smoking.

Liesl Picard: Yes.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: When I get to Paris, I remember at the airport, I bought a pack of cigarettes

Liesl Picard: You were so stressed. You were so nervous and stressed.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: and started again. And what I know that was…for the presentation of the work with Mr. Manigat.

Liesl Picard: Wow, right here.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And they started at 1:00 and at 5:00 I was still there.

Liesl Picard: Four hours later.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Asking me questions, so I went out at 6:00 and when I get home, I was at a friend’s house, I was asleep for two days.

Liesl Picard: A tremendous relief.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes.

Liesl Picard: Wow, wonderful and it was at that moment that you realized the magnitude of what you had contributed.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: But, what was very hard for me, that was like a vacation.

Liesl Picard: Right.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I could not find an editor to take the book. Here, I went to Pétion-Ville. First the UNESCO wanted to do it, but they say they need the agreement of the government.

Liesl Picard: Okay.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes that’s normal.

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So I traveled from New York here to have the agreement.

Liesl Picard: To get the agreement signed, okay.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah […]

Liesl Picard: Nothing more just a signature.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And they asked first to send the book to the president.

Liesl Picard: For his review and approval?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So he would decide. Yes. So I said okay, thank you, goodbye.

Liesl Picard: No thank you.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Because I am not going to change anything in my book because of…

Liesl Picard: Somebody’s personal opinion, yeah.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes. So finally when I came back to Haiti, I went to Dechamps.

Liesl Picard: Yes.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: and they asked me $80,000 for 2,000 books, so I had to pay half before and half…

Liesl Picard: After the publication came out?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: No, when they give me the books. So I decided no, I’m not going to do that. So, finally the Nouvelliste decided to do it […] I think 50,000, but they said you could pay after

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: and we put a subscription

Liesl Picard: Mmm hmm.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: and I could cover part of the…

Liesl Picard: From the purchases?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, but the 2,000 books disappeared in less than two years.

Liesl Picard: They were sold?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yeah.

Liesl Picard: Purchased? People picked them up in less than two years.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And I think that was a big success because in Haiti, if you publish a book and you can sell 500… and that’s something.

Liesl Picard: Copies it’s considered a great success. You’re happy with that.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: And that was 2,000 and so.

Liesl Picard: And what about second editions, third editions?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Okay, so I had… the first edition was so difficult for me. That I decided not to…

Liesl Picard: To drop the project again, you’ve had it.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: No, because I had 200 photographs in that.

Liesl Picard: Yes.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: So I had to go through each artist

Liesl Picard: And request permission

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Request permission

Liesl Picard: For each photograph again.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, so I don’t want to do that anyway.

Liesl Picard: And you had felt that you accomplished what you wanted to accomplish?

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes.

Liesl Picard: I mean you had received the credit for all of the hard work you did.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: That’s okay.

Liesl Picard: It’s on record, it’s a wonderful resource and I’ll try to find it. Somehow I’ll find one.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I know it’s very difficult to.

Liesl Picard: Yes.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Very, very difficult, but you can… because people when they have the book, they keep it, they don’t sell it …

Liesl Picard: Right, it’s a collector’s item also.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Only way you can try on Amazon or Ebay…

Liesl Picard: Well thank you, thank you very much.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: If you want a copy.

Liesl Picard: Well thank you very much for taking the time. It’s been a pleasure and an honor to meet you. Thank you for all of your hard work and it’s certainly recognized by many who you know and many who you don’t know and I’ll be back shortly and I’ll see the museum open.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: I hope so.

Liesl Picard: And once again we’ll have access to the great works that you have here.

Michel Philippe Lerebours: Yes, I hope so.

Liesl Picard: Thanks to your hard work, thank you very much.