

PHOTOS & PHANTASMS



COCONUT SHY

Johnston refers to this young Trinidadian's load as unripe coconuts. Whereas they are, in fact, water coconuts

JAMAICAN ARTISAN

An important picture, as there is very little documentary evidence for black artistry in this period

A SET OF ORIGINAL GLASS PLATE NEGATIVES UNCOVERED by chance in the vaults of the Royal Geographical Society has unearthed a unique photographic record of everyday life in the Caribbean at the turn of this century. Taken by the geographer, explorer and colonial officer Sir Harry Johnston, most of the images have not been seen since they were presented to the Society by Johnston's family in 1933.

The Caribbean photographs were part of a set of more than 1,000 images taken by Johnston and found in the Society vaults by picture library manager, Joanna Scadden. "As soon as I saw them I thought how incredibly beautiful they were but I had no idea of their importance," she says.

The discovery is significant because there are very few photographic archives of the region from that period. The photographs, which depict everyday life, are a vivid and accurate record of a lifestyle that has changed considerably this century, says the Jamaican art historian Dr Petrine Archer-Straw. "[They] defy post-independence political ideas that present the region as polyglot, multiracial and hybrid. Instead we find a Caribbean community that is predominantly black," she says.

The photographs were taken between 1908 and 1909. Johnston had been sent to the Caribbean by his friend the US President Theodore Roosevelt to produce a photographic document of the region. And some of the photos were included in Johnston's book *The Negro in the New World*.



FRONTIER TOWN

A section of the marketplace at Port au Prince, Haiti. The scene is dominated by peasant traders and donkeys, although there are some middle class Haitians

According to one Caribbean historian, most British historical writers of the period were “unrepentant imperialists who believed that West Indians were on racial grounds unfit for self-government,” says Archer-Straw. “Johnston, on the other hand, believed that they had experienced an accelerated development and proved themselves capable of governing their own affairs.” Although these views are outdated today, at the time they were considered progressive and liberal.

An exhibition featuring 70 of Johnston’s photographs is currently touring the Caribbean, arranged by the British Council in association with the Royal Geographical Society. A repatriation programme has also been organised which will see each of the four island nations featured – Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba and the Dominican Republic – receiving a full set of prints to add to their archives.

Dr Petrine Archer-Straw will be speaking about the touring exhibition at the Royal Geographical Society in London, this autumn.