



The Life & Art of Dustan St. Omer

by Anderson Reynolds

“By painting a black God and religious murals populated not just with black people, but with ordinary St. Lucians, St. Omer had effectively given St. Lucians back their God and religion.”

The Father of the St. Lucia Art Movement

Considered the father of St. Lucian painting, Dustan St. Omer is by far the island's best known painter. It would be difficult to visit St. Lucia and not be exposed to his work. His murals beautify Roman Catholic churches, schools and public places around the island. Trinidad, Martinique and Puerto Rico have also been blessed with his murals. His paintings decorate many St. Lucian government buildings and commercial houses, and are among the most prized of St. Lucian art. It would be very unconvincing to declare that one is a patron of St. Lucian art and not have a Dustan St. Omer painting hanging in one's home. The works of St. Omer are as visible and as much part of the aesthetic landscape of St. Lucia as are the Pitons, and it would be just as hard spending time in St. Lucia and remaining unaware of the Pitons as it would be not to lay eyes on St. Omer's work.

Given the prominence of St. Omer's creations, it is anyone's guess how much he has influenced the St. Lucian aesthetic and identity; the St. Lucian notion of what art and beauty are, and what it means to be a St. Lucian. Often the two—St. Omer's art and the Pitons (hence the St. Lucian character)—merge into one, as the artist has painted many different interpretations of the world heritage twin peaks. If someone was unlucky enough to have never visited St. Omer's homeland or laid eyes on his paintings and so believes he has escaped coming under the spell of St. Omer's art, he probably needs to think again, because one of the first things one notices about a country is its flag, and Dustan St. Omer is the creator of the St. Lucian flag. So it may not be an exaggeration to suggest that the artist helped influence the St. Lucian aesthetic and the St. Lucian national character. The flag presents yet another instance where St. Omer's art and the famed



Pitons merge to become one, for the black and yellow triangle symbolizes the twin mountains.

Dr. (Msgr.) Patrick Anthony, founder of the St. Lucia Folk Research Center, the Jubilee Trust Fund and the George Odum Foundation, and one of St. Lucia's foremost intellectuals and art philosophers, wrote in the St. Lucia Catholic Chronicle that Dustan St. Omer is "the premier Catholic muralist in the region." Similarly, it was reported that the London Daily Telegraph said that Dustan St. Omer is the Caribbean's Michael Angelo. How fitting to liken the St. Lucian artist to the great 15th century Italian painter (among other things), for in much the same way the Italian's religious paintings on the Sistine chapel represented the best and greatest of his creations, St. Omer's Roman Catholic church murals are considered his best and most famous works. Is it any wonder that some have gone further to say that

Dustan St. Omer is to St. Lucian painting what the great Derek Walcott is to St. Lucian poetry.

It maybe an understatement to say that Dustan St. Omer is the father of St. Lucian painting, and it is any one's guess how many St. Lucian painters that St. Omer has fathered? Or how many St. Lucian artists first picked up a brush after coming in contact with a St. Omer painting or mural? Or how many St. Lucians became conscious that there were people in the society called artists and painters only after they became aware of Dustan St. Omer the artist? "I hope some child ascribes their (statues of heroes) grandeur to Gregorias (Dustan St. Omer)," said Derek Walcott in *Another Life* (1973).

St. Omer's contributions have not gone unnoticed. From Queen Elizabeth, he received the MBE, Member of the most Excellent Order of the British Empire, pronouncing him a Squire. From the Pope, a Medal of Merit. And from his country,

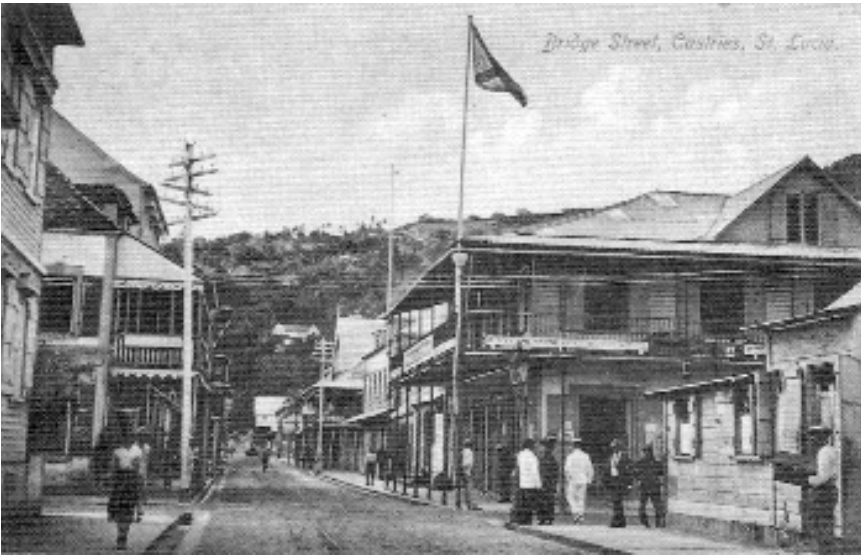
the St. Lucia Cross, for distinguished and outstanding service of national importance.

St. Lucian painter, Cedric George, originator of a new philosophy of art called Organometrics, appears to be a candidate for heir to St. Omer's artistic throne, in much the same way that St. Omer inherited the mantle from his mentor the famed Harry Simmons. An indication of that is that Cedric George seems to have received the nod from none other than Derek Walcott, who, not unlike four decades ago, in *Another Life*, praised St. Omer's art in much the same way that he now acknowledges Cedric George's paintings. If he can help it, Derek Walcott is known never to miss a Cedric George art exhibition.

A story often repeated by Cedric George is instructive on the influence of Dustan St. Omer on the St. Lucian art movement. The budding artist said that from the time he got interested in

painting, he took a keen interest in the works of Dustan St. Omer. He attended all of Dustan St. Omer's art exhibitions, and visited the artist's home to view more of his work. Dustan St. Omer had a series of portraits at the High Court in Castries from which Cedric said he drew great inspiration and determination to be a painter. The first time he saw the paintings, he got so lost marveling at them that he became oblivious to the closing of the court house and so got locked inside. Cedric said that Dustan St. Omer was his Matisse. What does he mean by that? Well, it is said that when the younger Picasso first saw Matisse's paintings, he was held spellbound and later used the older man's work as the standard to achieve and then to surpass. So maybe without a Matisse there would not have been as great a Picasso. Likewise, St. Omer's work was the gauge by which Cedric judged his art, and was the inspiration that enabled him to strive to elevate his





Bridge Street, Castries, before 1927

art to the farthest reaches of his talent and imagination. Without Dustan St. Omer, Cedric George may not have dug deep enough inside himself to pull out Organometrics.

It was with excitement tinged with awe that I signed on to interview Dustan St. Omer. Excitement, because I hoped soon to discover what was involved in the making of a great artist? What matrix of factors led to the art of Dustan St. Omer? Awe, understandably, given the greatness and national aura of the man.

On meeting the artist at his studio in River Stone, Gros Islet, I quickly recalled what a contemporary of his told me. He said that St. Omer gets much praise and admiration for his paintings, but the most remarkable thing about the artist isn't his paintings but his unbelievable self confidence. St. Omer stands more than six feet tall, with an erect aristocratic bearing that would make him stand out in most crowds. He looks upon one with an unblinking, majestic stare, and walks with a purpose and poise that leaves no doubt in anyone's mind that he commands the ground upon which he stands. He speaks in a sonorous, measured, leisurely and cultured voice that appears to have never harbored self doubt. His sudden, crackling laugh at the end of a comment never fails to surprise, and removes any residual doubt in one's mind of his self confidence.

Where It All Began

Dustan St. Omer was born in the late 1920's into a devoted Roman Catholic family. His father, whom Dustan described as a "gentle giant," worked as a custom officer. His mother was a house wife whose heightened sense of fashion sometimes rubbed the church the wrong way. Dustan was a middle child; before him a brother, after him a sister. The St. Omer household also included two other children, both boys, Dustan's half brother and a cousin. The artist characterized his parents, whom he said included his beloved maternal grandmother, as people with a "certain dignity" about them, and with an "absolutely, unquestioning, belief in God."

The family was situated in Castries, then as now St. Lucia's capital and principal town. St. Omer describes the Castries that he grew up in as a very quiet, clean, peaceful, beautiful, poetic

and even romantic little town with a village atmosphere, where lots of people still walked barefooted. It was a virtually crime-free town of kerosine street lanterns, of one or two cars, where the garbage was taken away by a horse cart, and the sewage system consisted of porters (whom residents often referred to as the bucket brigade) moving from house to house at 9PM, picking up night soil, loading it onto a sloop that dumped its cargo out in the open sea.

St. Omer reminisces that at the time Castries and St. Lucia was 99 percent Roman Catholic. The church was the centre of the life of the people. Everything was centred around it. There was the Anglican church but it was more like the church of the colonials. The St. Lucians who worshipped there were more of Bajan or Antiguan descent. St. Lucians for the most part were Roman Catholic people. When one said Roman Catholic they meant a real, original St. Lucian.

More importantly, however, and more so than today, Castries was the gateway to the island, and its natural harbor along with surrounding hills upon which could sit guns to defend the harbor against enemy ships, made it one of the Caribbean's most strategically important ports.

At the turn of the 20th century, in the days of steam boats, Port Castries was a major Caribbean coaling station, and since the days of colonial rivalry between England and France and right through the second world war the town was always home to one type of military establishment or the other. War ships made frequent visits. According to St. Omer, the Castries of his youth always had lots of sailors and there were plenty of rum shops to cater for the sailors' seemingly unquenchable appetite for women and alcohol.

Therefore, more than any other part of the island, it was in Castries that one would have been exposed to the cross currents of world news, trends and ideas. The kind of exposure that would have no doubt fuel the artistic imagination of a young Dustan St. Omer.

How It All Began

The artist does not remember when he started drawing, nor what was the first thing he drew. Neither can he remember anyone teaching him to draw or that it was after watching someone draw that he got into it. All what he knows is that he has always loved to draw and he has been drawing from as far back as he can remember. It appears that drawing came natural to St. Omer. He simply picked up pencil and paper and started drawing. Still, he offered a possible explanation of how he got started. He was told that he was a sickly child and thus spent a lot of time at home, not attending school. So he reckoned that with no children around to play with, he must have taken up drawing to pass the time.

Not only was St. Omer a natural, but apparently he had always been better at drawing than anyone around him. "I was born to be a painter," said the artist. "It is the thing I always did best. It is the thing whenever I did it, I did it better than anyone



Banana Plantation

else." He told the story about his father who, on some rainy days when he couldn't go to work, held drawing competitions among the children of the household, and would reward the winner with a candy. Of those competitions, St. Omer said that though he was the youngest of the boys he always won.

This, however, would prove just the beginning of St. Omer making his art pay off. He said he used to love images of Sacred Hearts (a catholic icon in which the heart of Jesus is shown exposed). So after watching someone painting Sacred Hearts with water colours he went home and started painting his own. He had a darling of a grandmother who used to sell in the Castries market. So when he needed money for, say, matinee, he would give her his Sacred Hearts to sell. He made three pence for each Sacred Heart, which, according to him, was plenty of money in those depression times.

Then there was the headmaster of the Roman Catholic Boys' School where St. Omer attended who had this habit of giving a candy to every boy who produced a good drawing in art class. It was a tradition out of which St. Omer made quite a few cents. Because in order to ensure that they collected their candies, some of the boys would pay St. Omer a cent to draw on their slates. They then etched the drawings with pins and used spit to hide the etchings, and in art class they traced the etchings to recover the drawings and thus collect their candies.

St. Omer's art would pay off in another way and would set him apart for special treatment. He said that the school was always involved in a bazaar around Easter, so when Easter was drawing near the headmaster used to excuse him from classes, set him up by the stage with drawing paper and water colors, and there he painted pictures for the school to sell at the bazaar. The young artist never saw a cent from the sales of these paintings but he said getting to skip classes, which he hated, and being allowed to do what he loved, was more than enough compensation.

Apparently, St. Omer's gift of drawing wasn't the only thing that set him apart. Talking about his siblings, he said his parents called his brother "the Prince of Wales" and his sister "my only daughter," but he can not remember his parents calling him by a

nickname. It seems as the middle child he had to come up with his own claim to fame. The artist said looking back it appears that from the time he was small he had an "individual mind." Because though he did not see himself as troublesome, and he was a "nice child" who didn't do unruly things but did everything for his parents to love him, so much so that his mother came to trust him totally, he was the one she used to beat all the time. To further make the point that it seems from early on he had a mind of his own, St. Omer recalled a day at the Anglican Infant School that he attended as a four year old. At that school there was a hat rack for students to hang their hats as they entered the building, and on certain days the school engaged its pupils in a drill where they would go around and take their hats off the rack. However, on the day that stuck in St. Omer's mind the students were not supposed to pick up their hats, yet each time he passed he would take his hat. He said "they burst my tail, but the next time I passed I took my hat." To this day, other than to suggest that he was unconventional right from the start, the artist can not understand why he had kept taking his hat.

School Days Were Not Happy Days

Naturally, I thought school must have played an important role in the development of St. Omer as an artist. So I was a bit taken aback to hear him say, "I hated school, I hated school bad." The artist "hated school so bad" that back then he thought it was unfortunate that no hurricanes ever struck to destroy the school buildings. But why did the young St. Omer hated school so much? He said that in those days teachers had tremendous powers over students. They were like gods. They dominated one's life. School was a horrible experience for him. He was afraid of school; while at home he received plenty of parental love, in school there was always someone with a belt or a cane ready to beat you. He hated the structure of it all. He wanted to do his own thing, which was to draw. School was preventing him from drawing as much as he would like.

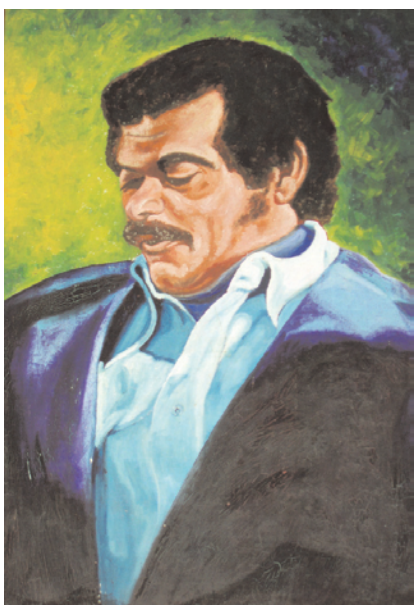
However, things changed somewhat when he started at St. Mary's College. The College was very sports oriented. The boy's started the morning by playing cricket or football in the yard. In the afternoon, games, whether it be sports or excursions to the beach, were compulsory. St. Omer said he was never good at sports, but he loved it. Another thing that made St. Mary's College bearable was that there he had the opportunity of spending time with two other kindred spirits. Spa St. Helen, who would become a famous photographer, and Derek Walcott, a future Nobel Laureate.

I expected to hear that St. Mary's College had influenced St. Omer's art, because Derek Walcott has spoken of how the good, solid education, steeped in English tradition and literature, he had received in St. Lucian had been an important part of his educational building block. For example, in *The Schooner Flight*, *The Star Apple Kingdom* (1979), he said, "I had a sound colonial education." Furthermore, Sir Arthur Lewis represents yet another Nobel Laureate who got his early grounding at St. Mary's College. But St Omer said not at all. In fact, at the time St. Mary's College didn't even offer art as a subject. Nonetheless, the three kindred spirits of Spa, Derek and Dustan were so pas-

sionate about painting that they were the ones who introduced art in the school when they requested and sat for the Cambridge examinations, which they, though untutored, passed with flying colours.

St. Mary's College may not have offered art classes, but it offered English and literature, which would have exposed the young Derek Walcott to the great literary classics. The poet and playwright would go on to provide the intellectual foundation of the 1950's Arts Guild, of which Dustan St. Omer was part, and which, as we will see later, would set off an art revolution. Therefore, to the extent that the Arts Guild had helped fuel St. Omer's art, the St. Mary's College may have indirectly, if not directly, touched on his development as an artist.

St. Omer Meets the Master



Dustan St. Omer's portraits of Walcott (left), Simmons (center), and St. Omer himself

The link between school and St. Omer's art may have been tenuous, but the same cannot be said about Harry Simmons and St. Omer the artist. In fact, if Dustan St. Omer is the father of the St. Lucian art (painting) movement, then Harry Simmons was the godfather of the St. Lucian cultural movement.

Born and raised in Castries, St. Lucia, Harry Simmons (1915-1966) received his early education at the Methodist Elementary School and St. Mary's College. Later, as Cooperative Societies Officer and Registrar of Cooperative Societies, he attended cooperative courses in Jamaica and Cooperative College in Leicester, England. Despite his limited formal education, by all accounts, Simmons was a renaissance man. Derek Walcott said he was "one of the first water colourists the West Indies has produced," and he helped "to create a community of writers and painters among whom were Sybil Atteck and Edgar Mittleholzer." Simmons became an Associate of the Royal Art Society, and although he wasn't an official art teacher, his art classes gained him the Art Teacher Diploma. Besides being a painter, Simmons was considered a botanist, historian, folklorist, journalist, and archaeologist. According to Derek Walcott, he

was an "eloquent interpreter and defender of creole and creole customs." However, Simmons wasn't simply a man stuck in his studio, or out there conducting solo forays into the history, anthropology, and wildlife of the island. He was also a man of civil society, a social and cultural activist. He played a leading role in the St. Lucia Boy's Scout, and he served on the St. Lucia Tourist Board and Library Committees. He also served on the Advisory Committee of the Extra Mural Department of the University of the West Indies, the Castries Fire Relief Fund Committee, and the Economic and Financial Advisory committee. Furthermore, he was a founding member of the St. Lucia Archaeologist and Historical Society and the St. Lucia Arts and Craft Society.

St. Omer was in his early teens when he first met with Harry Simmons. His aunt showed Simmons one of his paintings, and, impressed, Simmons asked the teenager to join his Saturday art

classes. These art classes, which were also attended by Derek and Spa St. Helen, would prove to be quite a revelation for the young St. Omer.

He said that it was on those Saturdays at Harry Simmons' studio that he got his "first introduction to real art." True, before meeting Simmons, St. Omer used to draw, but with Simmons he learned that art is not just about drawing. He learned that "Art is on the level of poetry and philosophy." Now, it isn't that the aspiring artist wasn't doing his homework. He said he used to spend hours in the Castries central library studying art books, familiarizing himself with the work of the European masters. But all along he was under the misconception that art was what was in those books, and anything outside those books wasn't art. So being an artist simply meant reproducing the works of the masters.

St. Omer's misconception was akin to someone who, in learning a foreign language, imitates down to the last detail the accent of the particular local where he is being tutored, thinking that the accent is as much an integral part of the language as the alphabet, only to discover later that while the basic language remains the same, the accent changes from local to local. Looking back, St. Omer said he wasn't surprised that he had



A couple of St. Omer's famed Madonnas

formed such an impression of art. Because, after all, this was the colonial era, "where all the values were the colonial values," and everything else was considered inferior, vulgar, uncultured.

In sharp contrast to St. Omer's notion of art, Harry Simmons told his proteges to "paint what you see, paint what was around you, paint what was yours." According to St. Omer, he made them "see that following the European thing was imitation. Simmons discovered art for us." However, the master was not all about talk. St. Omer said that his encounter with Harry Simmons represented the first time he was meeting a real artist working in a real studio, and was the first time he was seeing paintings of St. Lucian scenes. Simmons painted coconut trees, fishermen with their canoes, country folk, madrases, St. Lucian heroes. "Suddenly," said St. Omer, "in Harry's studio St. Lucia became art." Simmons' students couldn't doubt his message because, said St. Omer, "thank God he was a very good painter." In fact, Simmons was the best painter that his aspiring artists had come across, and one whom St. Omer labelled a genius for cultivating a disposition towards St. Lucia and his art when everything about the colonial era suggested a completely opposite orientation. At the time of Simmons' death in 1966, Derek Walcott wrote. "For us he was like a walking museum that contained knowledge of all styles and our first paintings slavishly imitated his ... Because of him we could not have become anything else, and whatever honours his former pupils gain are homage to his spirit." Listening to St. Omer and reading Walcott, one leaves with the impression that Harry Simmons was a man ahead of his time.

However, despite being such an eye opener to his students, according to St. Omer, Harry Simmons didn't teach them how to paint. He didn't teach them techniques and so on. But what he taught his students couldn't be found in text books or structured art classes. He unleashed the imagination and channelled the talent and creativity of his proteges towards what was inside them and what was their own. He set them off on a journey of self discovery, on a pilgrimage to claim what was rightfully theirs. He gave them new pairs of eyes with which to see their country and behold their people. And what they saw and behold was amaz-

ing beauty, beauty no less disserving of art, of theatre, of music, of poetry than any other. Simmons did nothing less than liberate the St. Lucian souls of his proteges and set these souls soaring.

St. Omer's relationship with Simmons and Walcott was important to the development of his art, but so too was his relationship with Spa St. Helen. According to Dr. Patrick Anthony, St. Helen contributed to the artistic development of both Walcott and St. Omer, because being the most worldly of the three, it was he who took Walcott and St. Omer around the island to see for themselves what Harry Simmons was telling them to paint, and as the photographer among them, it was the subjects of his photographs that would later populate St. Omer's murals and paintings.

The Curacao Experience

Race is another factor that would influence the direction of St. Omer's art. He said that in these colonial days St. Lucia was a very racist and class oriented society, where the color of one's skin was closely linked to one's station in life. He said, "A few white people were at the top—The Administrator, the Chief of Police, the Chief Justice, the Priest—and in the colonial service the red skin fellows were given the better jobs—that's what they did, they used niggers to control niggers—and the black fellows had to fend for themselves."

He said that at St. Mary's College the white boys were the "dummiest" and least talented students, but everyone knew that upon graduation they had their jobs, in the colonial service or in the commercial houses, waiting for them. But when the black boys left school they couldn't get jobs.

Fortunately for St. Omer, following World War II, there was a shortage of workers in the industrial countries. So, taking advantage of job opportunities in Curacao, which at the time had the third largest oil refinery in the world, he skipped the later half of his fifth form year and immigrated to Curacao, where he found employment as a lab assistant in one of the oil refineries.

In several ways, Curacao presented the seventeen year old artist with the experience of his life. It gave him his first taste of a worldly existence. With his salary, which he said was equal that



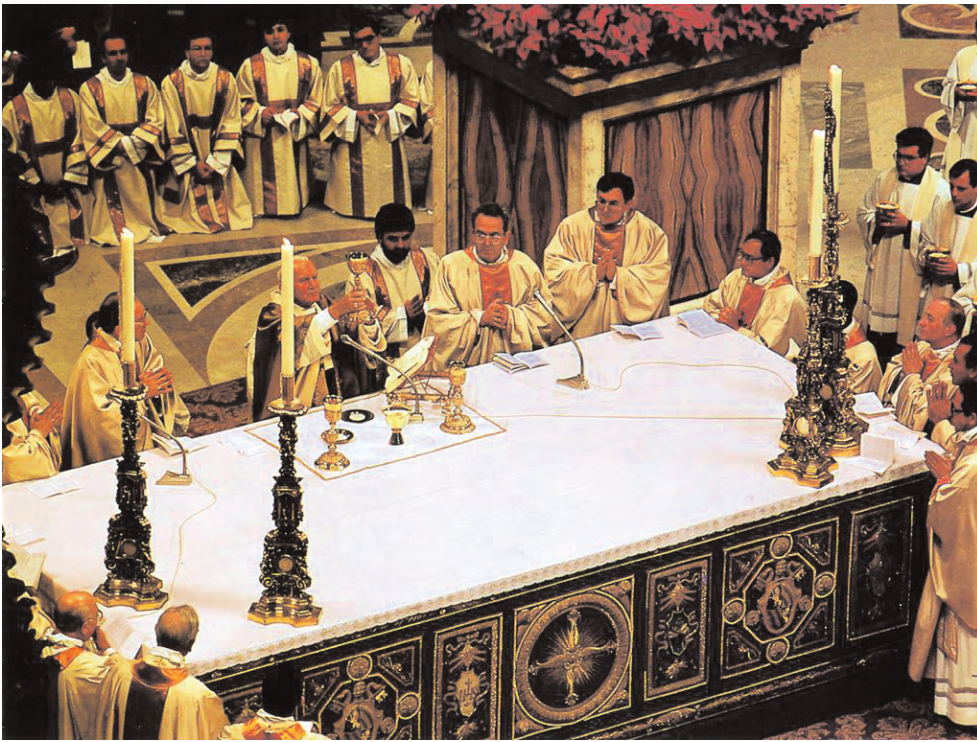
Purple Musicians

The Holy Family Mural



Church of the Holy Family. Jacmel, Anse La Raye





Vatican II

of the Administrator back home, he bought a feast of art and literature books, and his first set of canvases and oil paints. Before that he could only afford to paint with water colour. He said, "When I opened my first can of oil paint and smelled the paint, that was the greatest smell I had experienced in all my life. Every time I smell oil paint it gives me that sensation." In Curacao St. Omer met a Greek artist, the leading painter on the island, from whom he learnt a lot, including brush stroke techniques. But equally important, Curacao brought people together from across the Caribbean and thus exposed St. Omer to the thinking, passions and cultures of other West Indians.

It was there also that he met and made friends with fellow St. Lucian, the late Maurice Mason. Upon their return to St. Lucia in 1950, reeling from the ideas and exposure they had received in Curacao, St. Omer and Mason approached Walcott with the idea of an arts guild, and so was the famous 1950's St. Lucia Arts Guild born, with Maurice Mason its first president, and Derek Walcott its principle writer (playwright and poet) and intellectual footing.

The Revolution

The two decades leading to the founding of the Arts Guild and the decade after that represented one of the most turbulent periods in West Indian history. The Great Depression (1929-1939), which is considered the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world, ravaged the region. Workers were subjected to unlivable wages and deplorable working and living conditions. The result was spontaneous labor uprisings with often deadly consequences. Region-wide, between 1935 and 1939, no fewer than forty-six labor protestors lost their lives in clashes with authorities. British warships docked at bay for the sole purpose of quelling labor uprisings became a salient feature of the

regional landscape.

Under this onslaught, the cosy relationship that once existed between Britain and its West Indian subjects was shattered. Labor Unions and Political Parties fighting for universal suffrage, self-rule and self determination sprang overnight.

Along with seeking political autonomy, West Indians also began an earnest quest of self discovery and self definition. They began the cultivation of a West Indian identity as distinct from their colonial heritage. This new West Indian persona found ultimate expression in the notion of a West Indian Federation, such that for once West Indians were willing and able to put aside race, class and island barriers and buy into the concept of regional unity. For once the idealism of regional identity transcended all else.

In this turbulent era, the demand for national freedom and self determination was by no means limited to the

Caribbean. In fact, it was a worldwide phenomenon. By 1947, India and Pakistan had fought and won their independence. Starting in the fifties, the African continent had begun their independent march. Their cry for freedom and "Africa for Africans" could be heard loud and clear. In 1957, the Fidel Castro-led Cuban revolution had claimed Cuba for the Cuban people. In America, in 1955, the Civil Rights Movement had begun in earnest. Martin Luther King's famous "I Have A Dream" speech was only eight years away; and soon Malcolm X would start sewing his seeds of armed self-defense and black nationalism that would germinate into the Black Panther and Black Power Movements.

In St. Lucia, as in most of the other British West Indies colonies, the people's revolution was being fought on two fronts. On the one hand, there was George Charles, John Compton and their compatriots fighting for workers' rights, fighting for self-rule, fighting for political and territorial liberation. And on the other hand there was the St. Lucia Arts Guild fighting for the hearts, minds, and souls of St. Lucians; fighting to free the St. Lucian psyche from, as Bob Marley said, "mental slavery," fighting to decapitate the notion that provincial means inferior, that the island's creole culture wasn't worthy of art and celebration, and that black wasn't beautiful.

The St. Lucia Arts Guild represents the greatest outpouring of St. Lucian artistic creativity. Among its more notable members were novelist Garth St. Omer, playwright Roderick Walcott, painter Dustan St. Omer, and poet, playwright and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott. The period which the Arts Guild span could certainly be a candidate for the golden era of St. Lucian art and literature, for up till today these above mentioned exponents of the Arts Guild have remained unmatched in St. Lucia in their respective fields of artistic endeavor.

St. Omer harbors no doubt about what motivated this outburst of creative energy. He said, "It was a time in history when the world was changing. The whole world was moving towards

independence and self determination, the break down of colonialism and imperialism." He went further to explain that part of the reason for forming the Arts Guild was to rid St. Lucians of their inferiority complexes. "The black boys (the Arts Guild) were up, recreating their society, kicking out the Victorian society that overlaid the country." For example, he said that in those days "It was forbidden" to speak patois in schools, then "Derek with his genius" started writing poems and plays peppered with St. Lucian patois and in which he was using the syntax of patois, thereby creolizing his writings, "and patois became legitimate, in the process giving the people back their language, and in the process giving them their self confidence, in doing that they found their equality. Because as long as you using another man's thing you are not equal, but when you doing your own thing you are yourself. You are equal."

However the Arts Guild did more than uplift the St. Lucian spirit. According to St. Omer, it started a revolution in West Indian theatre. "We open the West Indian dramatic mind. Everybody was paying tribute to us for that. At this time St. Lucia was leading the way in West Indian theatre. The rest of the Caribbean caught the bug of being local, of being original. It influenced a cultural revolution across the entire Caribbean."

How about Harry Simmons? What was his role in the Arts Guild? St. Omer explained that Harry Simmons never got directly involved in the Arts Guild. "He was an older man." He didn't help write scripts nor did he help direct plays. "But," said St. Omer, "he was a patron of the Arts Guild. He was like a father figure at the back of everything, so that gave the Arts Guild the kind of support it needed."

The Genius of Dustan St. Omer

And how about St. Omer the painter? How did these cross currents of history factor into his art? He said, "The colonial thing was a white black thing. Sometimes I used to ask God why? God gave me my talent, I got my answers. Breaking away from colonization was like a revolution. Doing my own thing, so I got the answer." And what was St. Omer's own thing? He painted St. Lucian landscapes, ordinary St. Lucian people engaged in their daily activities, and when the opportuni-

ty offered itself, religious murals populated with ordinary St. Lucians, including black Christ and black Madonnas. St. Omer explained, "If your God is white and the colonial power ruling you is white, then you are a slave forever." Yet, "the argument for Christ being black is stronger than the argument for Christ being white." So by painting a black God and religious murals populated not just with black people, but with ordinary St. Lucians, he had effectively given the people back their God and religion, in the process finally "breaking the back of colonialism." Clearly, like the Walcott brothers in theatre and Derek Walcott in poetry, Dustan St. Omer had unleashed his own revolution. Nonetheless, he could not have fully given the people back their religion without some help from what would turn out to be a very unlikely corner.

On January 25, 1959, seventy-six year old Pope John XXIII, who, following the nineteen-year rein of Pope Pius XII, was expected to be a caretaker Pope, sent shock waves across the Roman Catholic world when he was going to convene a council of the entire church, thus giving rise to Vatican II. Concluded in 1965, and representing only the 21st worldwide council in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, Vatican II was what would open the way for St. Omer to participate in the task of giving St. Lucia's back their God and religion. Vatican II introduced the then radical concept of people being responsible for their own consciences and thus allowed flexibility in how they internalize the Roman Catholic faith and how they adapt church services to reflect their culture. According to Dr. Patrick Anthony, taking to heart these radical notions, the St. Lucian Bishop, Charles Gachet, returned from the Vatican II Council "with a clear sense of the thrust towards indigenisation of the local Church and the challenge of inculturation of the faith into the culture of the people of St. Lucia."

One of the ways the Bishop sought to carry out his mission of St. Lucianizing the Roman Catholic church was to commission St. Omer to paint murals in the new churches that were being built. The first and probably the most famous of these murals was The Holy Family Mural, in the Church of the Holy Family at Jacmel, Anse La Raye, overlooking the great Roseau Valley. At the center of this religious family painting is a black, majestic Madonna with a white dove looking down upon her. Corresponding with the Madonna, most of the other subjects

Mural at The Prime Minister's Building, Waterfront, Castries





La Rose and La Marguerite flower festivals Mural



Church of St. Rose of Lima in Monchy, Gros Islet



The Last Super Mural, The Church of the

populating the mural are either of Indian (Carib or East Indian) or of African ancestry and present a rich display of St. Lucian life. There are fishermen in wind propelled canoes, a woman pulling in a seine (a fishing net), another fisherman is seen blowing a cong shell, announcing that the fish has arrived, a farmer is tending his bananas, a young man is beating a tanbou, another is playing a shak-shak and a couple is dancing to the folk music. Reenforcing the image of the Madonna, an Indian woman is seen nurturing a baby, and lest we forget that this is supposed to be a religious scene, two middle aged women are looking up at the Madonna with animated reverence, a black priest is in pious meditation, and an Indian man, with a priest standing behind him, is carrying a model for a new Church. Artists too are represented. A portrait of St. Omer turns around to gaze at the audience. In the background the Pitons and the St. Lucian sky and lush vegetation.

With this mural St. Omer did more than just change his subjects from white to black. Black becomes a motif, drawing attention to its primacy. As he explained, his use of black in this way represents an artistic breakthrough in the world of religious paintings. "In classical paintings they use black to form shadows, but in this painting I used black as a primary colour. So whereas in classical paintings they have rays of light permeating from the divine figure, I have black rays. I have St. Joseph in a beautiful black cape. So black is used as a colour and not merely as a shade." Clearly, in this mural St Omer changed the very psychology of blackness.

The second mural, which depicts St. Lucia's La Rose and La Marguerite flower festivals, was painted at the Church of St.

Rose of Lima in Monchy, Gros Islet. Like the mural of the Holy Family, a black madonna at the center of the painting dominates the scene. However, this mural is a much more festive one. According to historians the flower societies were derivatives of slavery and appear to be the slaves' or ex-slaves' attempt at mocking the English and French societies of the time. Accordingly, each flower society include representations of all the occupations and classes that made up these European and plantation societies, including armies and king and queens. To the left of the Madonna, St. Omer depicts the colourful and flamboyant La Rose society, equipped with a folk band and here everyone is joyfully singing, and dancing. To the right is the more subdued La Marguerite society with its less colourful garments to match its more sombre (than the red rose) marguerite flower. This group too is accompanied with a folk band, but its celebration is much more low key. Further bringing home the point that this mural is one of celebration, even the child sitting on the lap of the Madonna, with a ring of flowers in each hand to represent each of the flower societies, seems to be enjoying himself.

Dr. Patrick Anthony has pointed out the great irony of St. Omer's flower festival mural and the revolutionary ramifications of Vatican II. Years back the church had taken the stance that it would excommunicate anyone who joined these flower societies. And the church had so strongly opposed Banjo Man, a play by Roderick Walcott featuring the flower societies, calling it banal and labelling it as "contrary to the doctrine of the church," that the play was banned and denied its first staging in 1958 at the first West Indies Arts Festival in Trinidad. Yet, a decade later, St.



The Holy Redeemer, Desruisseaux, Micoud

Omer's depictions of the flower societies was adding beauty and grace to the church. This also brings home the point about how revolutionary at the time was St. Omer's vision of giving the people back their God and religion by painting them into religious murals.

The Church of the Holy Redeemer in Desruisseaux, Micoud, is home to St. Omer's third mural, which renders the Last Supper. In this mural, instead of a Madonna at the centre, there is a black Christ crucified on the cross. This time the Madonna occupies the upper left hand corner of the mural, and in the upper right hand corner is a black priest or a black Christ blessing the Passover. Most of the other subjects in the painting are cast in groups of two or threes and they are either in a state of pious devotion or they are joyfully partaking of the body of Christ. To reinforce that the Last Supper is of celebration as much as of worship, it is accompanied with music as represented by a guitarist on each side of the mural.

The last of St. Omer's post Vatican II religious church murals, called *The Black Jesus*, can be found in the Church of St. Philip and James in Fonds St. Jacques, Soufriere. In no other mural did the artist as emphatically attempted to give the people back their God and religion as with *The Black Jesus*. In the center of the mural sits a magnificent and majestic black Jesus. He has a well shaped Afro hair style. A white flowing robe thrown over his shoulder covers the left half of his torso, while the other is exposed to display an envious physique exuding power and strength. Two fingers of his right hand is raised in peace and love, or peace be unto you, and his left hand stretches out from under the robe to welcome all onto him. The lower half of his body is

also adorned with a flowing robe, but this time the colour of red roses. A trio of flute players, another trio of folk musicians, a disciple holding a basket overflowing with bread and fish, St. Omer's trademark black Madonna, various priests who have served in St. Lucia (including Father John, Bishop Gachet, and Msgr Patrick Anthony) all come together to form the mural. Also, and as always, there are ordinary St. Lucians carrying on with their lives. The Pitons and the rich, fertile St. Lucian countryside are in the background. And in this mural there seems to be more children than in the others as if to say "suffer little children to come onto me."

St. Omer's religious paintings have received much critical scrutiny and acclaim. Dr. Patrick Anthony said, "St. Omer located revolution at the level of religious consciousness of a people, paving the way for a radical acceptance of an indigenous Christianity."

In *Another Life* (1973), Derek Walcott described some of St. Omer's religious paintings as "brown-bottomed tumbling cherubim,/ broad-bladed breadfruit leaves/ surround his oval virgin/ under her ringing sky,/ the primal vegetation/ the mute clangour of lilies,/ every brush stroke a prayer/ to Giotto, to Masaccio,/ his primitive, companionable saints."

Dr. Antonia McDonald Symthe, dean of literature studies at St. Georges University, St. Georges, Grenada, said "These religious murals, especially the altar piece at Jacmel Church, represent St. Omer's cross-cultural fusion of European Christianity and St. Lucian provincialism. The sacred and the secular are happily merged in a bold, coloured, primal Caribbean Tapestry...While St. Omer makes use of the conventional iconog-



The Black Church of St. Philip and James



Jesus Mural
Fonds St. Jacques, Soufriere.



Prismism Mural, Sir Arthur Lewis Community College, Castries

raphy of rural landscape, that is verdant hills; rural, fertile lands—happy poverty—he invest these with symbolic fusion. For him the divine and harmonious world becomes the manifestation of divine power and glory... At the same time, while these familiar, natural images illuminate the spiritual life of the artist, they also subverted colonial expectations by replacing harps and trumpets with shak-shak, cong shells and drums. And the colour black, typically used in art to represent shadows, works in St. Omer's paintings as a primary colour dominating the centre of his mural."

In addition, Dr. Symthe said that despite the indigenoussness or provincialism of St. Omer murals, they demonstrate that the artist "is well aware of the international artistic conventions and has absorbed with intelligence and great diligence the classical vocabulary. Witness, for example, the ways in which he conveys divinity by the use of semi abstractness of prisms in the depiction of the Virgin Mary or his insistence on circles to suggest the embracing force of divine love."

Some have said that art is more about the artist than the subject matter of the art. We have seen why issues of race and class played such an important role in what St. Omer chooses to paint, but why is the artist so taken up with religious paintings? Well, throughout our discussion, the artist expressed an unshakeable faith in God and the love of his religion. He said, "Everything I receive in my life I believe that I got it from God." He also said, "I'm very proud to be a Roman Catholic. The church has played a very important role in my life. Couple years ago I paid my first visit to the Vatican and when I entered Saint Peters, which was packed with people from all over the world, I was at home there just as I was at home in St. Lucia. A worldwide fellowship." He said further, "One thing that has sustained the black man is his

religion. He may have no money, no education, nothing, but his religion gives him strength."

In his murals St Omer brought race, class and religion together to make powerful statements. With one stroke of the brush he defeated the racial atrocities that blighted his country and gave expression to his religious passions. In fact, St. Omer's murals encompass all three of the elements—the St. Lucian Landscape, ordinary St. Lucians engaged in their everyday activities, and religious personas such as his trademark Madonnas—that continue to define his work. His St. Lucian subjects, both in his murals and in his other paintings, appear robust, confident, self assured, contented, at peace with themselves and well adjusted to their society and to their way of life. With a few brush strokes, the artist has forever ennobled the ordinary St. Lucian and uplifted his people to the level of gods. St. Omer said, "My country is as beautiful as any other so I paint my beautiful country. My people are as beautiful as any other so I paint my beautiful people." To that I am sure he would add, "my religion is as wonderful as any other so I paint my wonderful religion."

To the artist, ennobling St. Lucians is not just an issue of visual effect. He said St. Lucia is an artistic country and he believes St. Lucians are a free spirited and aristocratic people, and according to him this accounts for why such a tiny country has produced two Nobel Laureates. Here is how he explains it. "You see although we were poor we were never really suppressed, at least not as much as some of the other Caribbean islands. St. Lucia had a history where slavery never lasted long. The longest continuous period of slavery is sixty years. Thanks to the French Revolution, St. Lucia was one of the first countries in the new world to gain its independence. Well, they took it back



First and second generations of St. Omer Painters

from us, but during the French Revolution the fellows came and established liberty, equality, and fraternity. St. Lucians have that kind of *lògei*, that kind of pride, because for the most part they had always been a free people. When you are free, your mind is big, you see universal, nothing you see outside is bigger than you. How could such a tiny island as St. Lucia produce two Nobel Laureates. Derek Walcott is the mainstay of English literature today. How can a little country like this produce such greatness. It is something in its society, in its nature. St. Lucians may admire you, but they don't worship you. There is a quality, an aristocratic trait in St. Lucians. Every St. Lucian is an aristocrat. And that's something I don't want the politicians to destroy."

A brief look at history suggests there maybe some truth to St. Omer's premises. Because of Carib hostilities followed by the none ending rivalry between the English and the French for St. Lucia, the island was one of the last Caribbean territories where sugar and hence slavery took hold on a large scale. Yet, even after sugar and slavery were firmly established, the constant fighting and back and forth changing ownership of the island between France and England introduced frequent interruptions in plantation life. Many slaves seized upon the chaos that accompanied these interruptions to escape from the plantations. Furthermore, unlike islands like Barbados, Antigua and St. Kitts, which were very flat and thus most of the land area came under sugar cultivation, the mountainous terrain of St. Lucia meant that large portions of land were deemed marginal and unsuitable for plantation cultivation, and therefore were available to the slaves for cultivating their own crops, thus limiting their dependence on the plantations for their survival. Also, the mountains made it easier for the slaves to escape to freedom and sustain that freedom. In fact, in his book, *They Called Us Brigands: The saga of St. Lucia's Freedom Fighters*, Robert Devaux reveals that, considering the number of discovered moron sites, moronage activity was most prominent in Jamaica and St. Lucia. All this suggest that slavery did not bite as hard in St. Lucia as in some of the other islands, and so St. Omer may be correct in suggesting that St. Lucians have always enjoyed relatively greater freedom than have some of her Caribbean neighbours. And, of course, we would need to add St. Omer's name to the list of great St. Lucians whom as he said this freedom has helped produce.

Besides Harry Simmons, who were the painters that had the most influence on St. Omer's art? To this question the artist answered that the Renaissance, and later the impressionist painters had the greatest influence on his painting. However,



Third generation St. Omer Painter

beginning at age twenty-two, he started experimenting, doing his own thing. Out of that experimentation St. Omer said he invented a style of painting coined prismism by Derek Walcott when they were painting together in the fifties. He said the best and biggest example of his prismatic work is to be found in the Church of St. Francis in Martinique. However, a lesser example of St. Omer's invention can be found in St. Lucia at the extra mural department of the Castries branch of Sir Arthur Lewis Community College. Dr. Patrick Anthony described St. Omer's Martinique prismism mural as a "Triptych explosion in Prismism."

St Omer hinted that at St. Mary's College geometry was his favourite subject, and one of the highlights of his school days was when he learned and proved that the shortest distance between any two points was a straight line. He said that this geometric concept has stayed with him all his life, has formed the basis of all his logic, and became his answer to everything. The design of the St. Lucian flag bears witness to this influence of geometry on St. Omer's artistic sensibilities. Prismism represents yet another witness. The prismism mural at the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College presents a fiery assembly of prisms and other geometric shapes, where the human form is being rapidly replaced by the geometric.

His mural's aside, most of St. Omer's paintings have a rough, unfinished look. Obviously, more often than not he uses a pallet knife to apply paint to canvass. I asked him about that. He said that yes he prefers to use the pallet knife than the brush, because he doesn't set out to reproduce pictures. Giving expression or his own interpretation to the subject is more important to him than capturing every fine detail. Besides, he said that with the pallet knife he achieves a greater sense of excitement in his paintings. Indeed, most of St. Omer's paintings have not only a visual feel to them but they possess a tactile quality, as if it were not merely a painting of the object that was on display but the object itself. His clouds seem to be dancing, his mountains seem right there to be touched, and his people seem on the verge of bursting out of their frames.

Whom God Has Blessed

St. Omer's life as an artist bears testimony to the need for governmental support of the arts, for it seems without some form of assistance from the government, the artist

Harbour Log

(Castries, August 1955)

"statio haud malefida carinis" (old Badge of St. Lucia)

Translation: "A safe anchorage for ships."

In Port yesterday:

Schooners: Augustus B. Compton,

Acadius, Adalina,

Columbia, Enterprise,

S. Enid, Rebecca E. Mitchell.

Steamer: Electra.

Sloop: Lady Edwards.

Motor Vessels: Biscaya, Privateer, Nanin, Wanderer.

Yacht: Phenix.

Arrivals:

Motor Vessel Lady Stedfast, 87 tons, under capt. L.A. Marks, from St. Vincent, consigned to Peter & Co.

Departures:

Schooner Grenville Lass to Martinique.

Motor Vessel Fernwood to Barbados.

Expected:

Motor Vessel Nina on August 11.

H.M.S. Burghead Bay on August 24.

Meanwhile:

Sylvestre JnBaptiste, alias Master,

Seaman of Mary Ann Street, Castries,

was found guilty by the Magistrate in the First District Court, on a charge of unlawfully assaulting and beating

Dorothy Drayton, Laundress of Brazil Street, Castries, on July 23.

—John Robert Lee

might not have scaled the heights that he did. Here is what he had to say about that. "Its been a tough life because St. Lucia wasn't ready for artist, and I had to raise a family and make a living. Thank God they made a job for me in the ministry of education. The person I have to thank for that is Hunter Francois. And then I taught in the ministry for about thirty years. I was commissioned to propagate art throughout the island. I was getting a salary, I could raise my family and I could paint. Other than that it wasn't possible."

Notwithstanding St. Omer's fame as a painter, the artist would be disappointed if one was to think that his life had been just about painting. Lest that I should leave the interview with such a misleading impression, the artist said, "I had a good life. I have a nice, large family. All my children (nine) are healthy and doing well. All the boys (four) are brilliant artist. The daughters are also brilliant." He said that thirty years ago one of his daughters, Sophie St. Omer, who now resides in the U.K., became the first St. Lucian finalist in a Miss World contest. Another daughter, Dr. Lydia St. Omer, who has made her home in Italy, became the first (and maybe still the only) West Indian to gain the fellowship of the Royal Society of Radiologist. As starters she received first class honours in medicine (MD), next a PhD in medicine, and then she entered the college of Radiology. Considering all




Part of the 2005 carnival band (Ritual) that took its inspiration from the creative energy of St. Omer

this, the artist said, "I am blessed. Thank God. When you believe in God everything good will happen to you. When you set your mind on trying to help others, you cannot fail. When you concentrate on yourself you become insular, very narrow."

Approaching eighty, St. Omer shows no sign of hanging his brush or pallet knife. He said that since he is retired from the government service he has to paint to make a living. This is good news for the archdiocese of Castries, because as part of its preparations for Jubilee 2006, it has commissioned St. Omer to refurbish the existing murals in the city's Minor Basilica of the Immaculate Conception and to create fourteen new stained-glass windows depicting fourteen moments in the life of the blessed Virgin Mary. However, the project which is estimated to cost nearly a quarter million EC dollars, is truly a St. Omer family affair. Dustan St. Omer is the design coordinator, a son Lugi St. Omer the fine art director, another son Julio St. Omer the second fine art director, and a third son Giovanni St. Omer is the project director.

On my second visit to St. Omer's studio, this time to take photos of his paintings, I found a young lady working with the artist on the Minor Basilica project. St. Omer proudly introduced the young lady as his granddaughter, "the third generation of St. Omer painters." And if you are wondering how come St. Omer's sons have Italian sounding names, well the artist said that he named his sons by opening an art book and picking the first name his fingers came across.

St. Omer has clearly been blessed in more ways than one, and in the process he has blessed his country and its people, who thankfully continue to show him gratitude. This year the artist was chosen to grace the cover of the St. Lucia Cable&Wireless telephone directory; the Cultural Development Foundation paid its respects by selecting him as the featured or celebrated artist of the 2005 National Arts Festival; and Ritual, a St. Lucian Carnival Band headed by poet, Adrian Augier, paid special tribute to him by consciously invoking his creative spirit in the design of its costumes and the orchestration of its street parade. Dustan St. Omer is without a doubt St. Lucia's person of the year. And how fitting that this occurred in the same year that Trinidad proclaimed Derek Walcott its person of the year and France bestowed upon him Commander in the Order of Arts and Letters, its highest cultural award. It must be true, then, that greatness comes in pairs, and when it rains it pours. 

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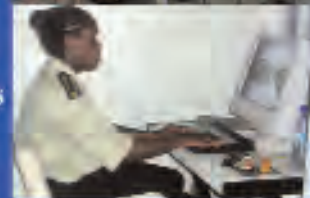


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