

Nottingham
Contemporary

KAFOU

20 October – 6 January
Exhibition Notes

For more information

If you have any questions or want to find out more about the exhibition, please ask our friendly Gallery Assistants. They're here to help!

We also have free Spot Tours of the exhibitions every day, Tue – Fri. Please ask for times at Reception.



Logo by Anthea Hamilton

Kafou

Haiti, Art and Vodou

Kafou is the largest exhibition of Haitian art ever held in Britain. It focuses on work by artists from the poor rural and urban majority, which has often been problematically labeled ‘naïve’, ‘self-taught’ or ‘popular’. It also focuses on work inspired by Vodou – or voodoo, as it is more commonly but controversially known. Although there are other themes in Haitian popular art – market scenes, jungle scenes and historical painting – it is often at its most imaginative, vibrant and profound when representing the spirits and rites of Vodou. Most of Haiti’s ordinary people practice Vodou, while also describing themselves as Catholics. It informs much of their culture and worldview.

Kafou means crossroads in Haitian Creole (from ‘Carrefour’ in French), an important concept in Vodou. The crossroads is where mortals meet immortals, or ‘the invisibles’, as the Vodou spirits are known. Kafou is a Vodou “lwa”, meaning god or spirit. When a devotee is possessed by one of the Vodou spirits, he or she becomes a vessel for that spirit while the possession lasts, and takes on that lwa’s temperament, voice, movements, colour, dress sense and appetite. To Vodou believers the natural and supernatural are perpetually in close proximity.



Seneque Obin, Toussaint Louverture, c.1950.
Private Collection of Aderson Exume, Washington

Gallery 1

The US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 led to a rethinking of Haitian culture by progressive intellectuals. Unlike the ordinary Haitian, the bourgeoisie had always over-identified with French culture, despite over a century of independence from its former colonial master. They were embarrassed by African influences in Haitian culture, especially Vodou, which by around 1930 was being sensationalised in populist American novels and Hollywood's first zombie movies. Humiliated by the racism of the US marines who were occupying Haiti, a generation of intellectuals – led by Jean-Price Mars and Jacques Roumain – started to investigate the society and religion of the Haitian peasant. Serious ethnographic studies were undertaken and a number of groundbreaking novels were set in the countryside. The movement was called Indigenisme and created the conditions for the positive reception of Haitian popular art in the 1940s.

In 1944 an American artist named DeWitt Peters, who was in Haiti teaching English, founded a visual art centre in Port-au-Prince with a group of Haitian artists who loosely identified with European modernism. Supported by the government, the Centre d'Art offered training to artists and held exhibitions of Haitian and international art. Within a year or two of opening the Centre d'Art attracted a number of untutored artists formerly working in isolation, many of whom became part of this artistic community.



Hector Hyppolyte, *Nude with Flowers*, 1946. Courtesy Museum of Everything, London

From 1945 Haitian popular art was championed by foreign cultural luminaries – André Breton, the leader of the Surrealists, Wifredo Lam, the Cuban modernist painter, and Truman Capote, the American writer, amongst others. Haitian popular art was enthusiastically received at an important international exhibition in Paris organised by UNESCO in 1947 and the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired several works for their collection.

The Surrealists were especially attracted to Haitian art and Vodou. According to René Depestre, a brilliant young poet at the heart of Haiti's cultural revolution, "the whole of Haitian culture is imbued with a popular surrealism, manifested in the voodoo religion, in the plastic arts and in the different forms of being among the people in Haiti".

Hector Hyppolyte (1894-1948) was the best known artist of this early period. Originally a housepainter and houngan (Vodou priest), his distinctive paintings were found decorating the walls of a rural roadside bar. In the few years he worked with Centre d'Art, before his premature death, he produced hundreds of magical, sensuous images of Vodou spirits, beautiful women and colourful flowers. Several Hyppolyte paintings grace this exhibition.



Philomé Obin, *Apothéose de F D Roosevelt*, 1945. Private Collection, Germany

Other key representatives of the ‘first generation’ of popular painters appear in the first gallery, including Wilson Bigaud, Castera Bazile and Rigaud Benoit, all of whom developed distinct styles. Bazile’s are the most vivid in colour, Benoit’s the most delicate and imaginary, and Bigaud’s the most tonal and compositionally daring. They and others were commissioned to make murals of Biblical scenes in the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Port-au-Prince in 1950-51.

After Hyppolite, Philomé Obin (1892-1986) is the next best-known Haitian artist. Obin never painted Vodou, and was a Baptist and freemason. Instead he painted scenes from the lives of the bourgeoisie in Cap-Haïtien, the Cacos guerilla revolt against the US occupation, carnival scenes, and the ceremonies of the freemasons. He became leader of the Cap-Haïtien school, located on the northern coast of Haiti. Many of his fellow artists were family relations who adopted his meticulous style and subject-matter.



Castera Bazile, Judgement Day, c.1950. Private Collection of Aderson Exume, Washington

His younger brother, Sènèque, is best known for portrayals of the heroes and victories of the Haitian Revolution. Haiti is the only nation born of a successful slave revolt. In 1803 its black generals defeated the forces of Napoleon at the Battle of Vertières and declared independence in 1804, an event that sent shockwaves throughout the colonial world, where a slave economy persisted. The Haitian Revolution is the founding moment of worldwide anti-colonial struggle. Haiti – and Vodou in particular – was subsequently caricatured and demonised by colonial nations who feared that revolution would spread. This denigration of Haiti’s culture and beliefs continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries – a legacy that is still prevalent today.

Georges Liautaud (1899-1991) was a blacksmith who DeWitt Peters and artist Antonio Joseph found making distinctive Vodou crosses for the cemetery in Croix des Bouquets in the 1950s. Soon he was making depictions of the lwa in cut steel, which began a trend in Haitian art for steel sculpture made from flattened oil drums that continues to this day. One of the sculptures here is an expressive depiction of Ogou, the god of warriors and blacksmiths. He appears brandishing his sword on horseback, the spirit of the Haitian revolution.



André Pierre, Simbi Rouangol, c.1950.
Collection Robert A. and Glory Fox Dierker, Washington

Gallery 2

The smaller part of this room is dedicated to individual lwa. It focuses on two artists and a selection of sequined flags used in Vodou ceremonies. André Pierre (1914-2005) was a painter and houngan whose early paintings were on the shells of calabash husks, which are used as bowls for food offerings to the spirits. His *lwas* appear as slightly piratical dandies, dressed to the nines in splendid military uniforms and ball-gowns that hark back to the opulence of slave-owning society in 18th Century Saint-Domingue, as Haiti was called under the French. In André Pierre's art, we seem to encounter the spirits quite casually in natural settings – forests, rivers and seas that appear spiritualised. At their feet are *veves* – spiritual signs specific to each spirit drawn in flour on the ground by their devotees to summon them to Earth.

Préfète Duffaut (born 1923) is the sole surviving major first generation artist. He is best known for visionary paintings of Jacmel, his hometown by the sea, which he depicts as an imaginary floating city. Some of the lwa he portrays are well known, like Danbala, who is symbolised by the snake and personifies the life-force. He is linked to St Patrick, the Catholic saint who drove snakes out of Ireland. Other gods are more obscure – their obscurity suggests the thousands of lesser known ancestral lwa. Duffaut's formidable lwa confront the viewer head on. Animal horns at their heads, limbs steeped in fire and blood, accompanied by the rhythm of sacred drums, they look ready for revolution.



Préfète Duffaut, Maitre Carrefour, 1951. Collection Dr Robert C. Bricston, San Diego

Voudou has one supreme god, Grand Met or Bondye, the creator of the universe. However he is detached from human affairs and the lwa act as intermediaries. Most spirits belong to two Vodou “nations”. The Rada nation derive from Dahomey spirits and tend to be benevolent and tranquil (the Dahomey Kingdom in what is now Benin in West Africa). The more pugnacious Petwo spirits, who were born out of the experience of slavery and revolution in Saint-Domingue, are often volatile and express rage. Vodou is a dynamic religion – its spirits reflect Haiti’s extraordinary history. Based on various African religions, it has absorbed traces of Catholicism, European folklore, indigenous religion, Islam and Freemasonry. Theologians call it a “syncretic” religion, meaning a combination of contrasting beliefs.

The sequined flags in this room are the only ceremonial objects in the exhibition. You can see the marks of their use on some of them – cuts and tears, burn marks, and what may be rum and animal blood stains. Devoted to individual lwa, they are used at the beginning of Vodou ceremonies to summon the spirit they represent. Every other flag at a Vodou ceremony is dedicated to Ogou, the spirit of war. Vodou flags have a number of sources – the sacred flags of West Africa and the military colours of colonial powers primarily. They may also reflect the regalia of Freemasons and Catholic banners dedicated to saints. Like Vodou itself Haitian flags syncretize, or combine, these historical and theological influences into something unique to Haitian Vodou.



Antoine Oleyant, Bousou/Treatment, 1991, Private Collection Sue Thomas, Miami

There are very few surviving sequined flags made before the 1940s. In 1941-42 there was a massive “anti-superstition” campaign against Vodou organised by the Catholic church, which led to the wholesale destruction of Vodou ceremonial objects, hounfours (Vodou temples) and even mapou trees, within which the spirits of ancestors are thought to reside.

The paintings and sculptures in the larger space in Gallery 2 are made by second and third generation Haitian artists whose work is particularly preoccupied by Vodou. LaFortune Felix and Pierrrot Barra were both Vodou priests. Each artist’s work is stylistically distinctive. Vodou appears rather sweet and idyllic in Alexandre Grégoire’s citrus coloured paintings, and darker and oppressive in Célestin Faustin’s work. Faustin died tragically young of a drug overdose at the age of 33. He felt himself oppressed by Erzuli Dant, the demanding spirit of maternal love to whom he was mystically married. Faustin’s art, like Gourgue’s, is concerned with dreams and the unconscious and comes close to Surrealist art. Camy Rocher drowned at sea at the age of 21. Apparently he had been anxious that Agwe, the admiral of the ocean deep, was displeased with him.



Madsen Mompremier, Lord Agoue, 2004 . Private Collection, London

Madsen Mompremier, who now lives in Florida, depicts Agoue as a general of the Haitian revolution. He often shows Agoue and his consort Lasiren, who appears as a mermaid, as gods in the manner of European Baroque ceiling paintings, resplendent in an oceanic or celestial space. The blue and red Haitian flag – which sometimes appears in Mompremier’s paintings – was made by removing the white from the French “Tricolore”. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Haiti’s first emperor, had most whites banished or slaughtered to ensure the eradication of slavery, after Napoleon had sent 30,000 troops to re-enslave blacks in 1801. He re-named the new republic Haiti, which means “mountainous land” in the language of the Taíno, the island’s original inhabitants.

An estimated half-million indigenous people were destroyed in a few short years by Spanish settlers after Christopher Columbus landed on the island in 1492. They were killed by disease, bullets and forced labour in Spanish gold mines.

Most of the art works in Gallery 2 were made during the terrifying rule of father-and-son dictatorship, ‘Papa Doc’ and ‘Baby Doc’ Duvalier, which lasted from 1957 to 1986. No direct references to contemporary political events are made in these works – to have done so would have meant risking torture and death at the hands of their murderous secret police, the Tonton Macoutes.



Prosper Pierre-Louis, *La Maternité*, 1986. Collection Galerie d'Art Nader, Port-au-Prince

Gallery 3

Many of the works in this gallery are by artists associated with Saint-Soleil, a movement of painters of peasant and proletariat backgrounds, including Prosper Pierre-Louis, Louisiane Saint Fleurant, Levoy Exil, Saint Jacques Smith and Richard Antilhomme. In the 1970s they were brought together and initially guided by Tiga (Jean-Claude Garoute), a member of Haiti's artistic and literary avant-garde who set up an artists' community in the mountains. Tiga sought to isolate the Saint-Soleil artists from the increasing commercialisation of Haitian popular art by Port-au-Prince galleries and their tourist clientele.

Instead of the powerful and identifiable lwa that appear in the work of André Pierre and Hector Hyppolite, the Saint-Soleil artists paint the multitude of anonymous spirits, either lwa or ancestors. Rudimentary faces – dreamy and abstracted (Exil), angry or terrified (Smith) or rather grouchy (Pierre-Louis) – float in a mystical watery or galactic space, suggesting the infinity of the Vodou cosmos. Some of these paintings resemble the “all-over” compositions of Abstract Expressionism. The white faces in Prosper's paintings evoke the dead, as well as perhaps the distant memory of the powdered, beauty-marked faces of French aristocrats.

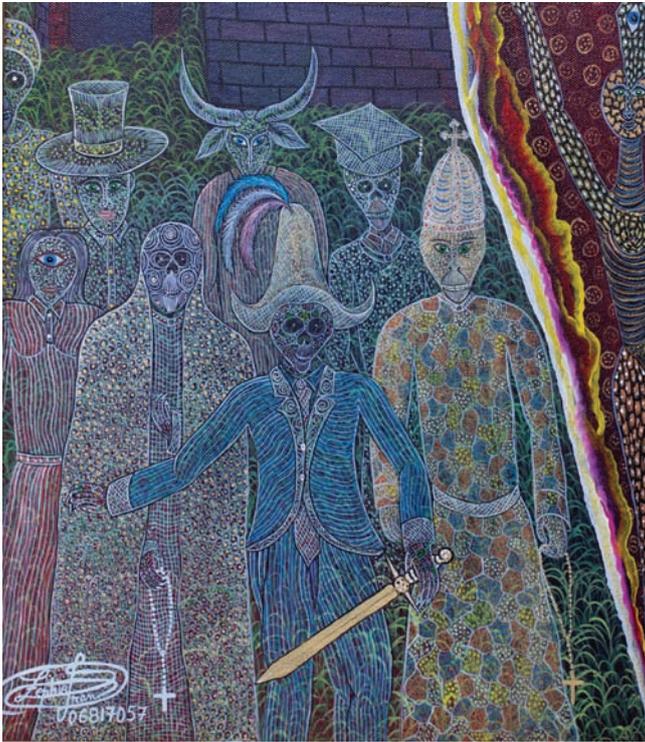


Gérard Fortune, *Femme Animal*, 1994. Collection Galerie d'Art Nader, Port-au-Prince

Also in this gallery are lyrical and often humorous Vodou portraits by Gérard Fortune, a self-taught artist now in his late eighties, who still works in the silence of night by candlelight. Antoine Oleyant (1955-92), is the leading flag-maker of his generation. A superb colourist, his flags of Iwa are also notable for their flat geometric compositions.



Myrlande Constant, *Baron*, c. 2005. Collection Bourbon-Lally, Beziers/Port-au-Prince



Frantz Zéphirin, Guede Wedding (detail), 2007.
Collection of Galerie Macondo, Pittsburgh

Gallery 4

Gallery 4 contains the works of four leading contemporary Haitian artists and an artist-group, Atis Rezistans (meaning 'resistance art'). Edouard Duval-Carrié and Frantz Zéphirin, both now based in Florida, combine the legacy of the history paintings of the Obin brothers (see Gallery 1) with Vodou imagery, resulting in a Haitian magical realism. Their work explores how Vodou has acted as a source of inspiration for popular revolt in Haiti, both at the time of the Revolution and during more recent events. Their subjects include the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier, the subsequent long road to democracy and the bloody coups d'états instigated by powerful internal and foreign vested interests. Duval-Carrié is a rare exception in the exhibition in that he has had an elite art education in Europe, while also being an influential advocate of Haiti's popular art.



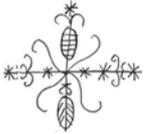
André Eugene, *Gede (L'homme que donne naissance de bebe)* 2010. Courtesy the artist.

The story of Vodou-inspired Haitian art is brought up to date with the extraordinary sequined flags of Myrlande Constant and Yves Telemaque, and the sculpture of the Atis Rezistans group based on the Grand Rue in Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince. Represented here by Andre Eugene, Celeur Jean Hérard and Ronald Bazile aka Cheby, Atis Rezistans make sculpture from the detritus of cheap First World imports dumped on Haiti. Seemingly prophetic of Haiti's appalling earthquake of 2010, which almost completely destroyed Grand Rue and killed over 200,000 people, they refashion found materials into post-apocalyptic Vodou lwa. These new spirits appear to be protesting against Haiti's extreme poverty and the frustrated political aspirations of the country's poor majority. Two million people have been forced into Port-au-Prince's crowded slums and ghettos by rural poverty caused by decades of national and international exploitation of Haiti's peasant farmers.

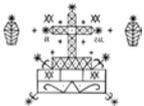
Introduction to major Lwas



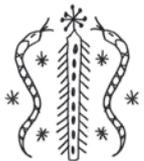
Legba
Legba is the first to be summoned at a Vodou ceremony as he is the keeper of the gates and governs the threshold to the spirit world. It is only with his permission that other spirits can cross into the earthly world.



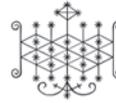
Kafou or Carrefour
Kafou's ceremonies always take place at a crossroads at night. Unlike Legba, he allows the crossing of malevolent spirits.



Papa Gede or Bawon Samedi
Wearing a top hat, black coat and sunglasses with one lens, Bawon Samedi controls the crossing from life to death. He is a trickster and his humour is bawdy.



Danbala
Peaceful, wise and popular spirit associated with snakes. Linked with St Patrick.



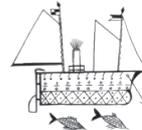
Ogou
Warrior, blacksmith and powerful political force. Said to have led the slaves to triumph in the revolution. Associated with St James.



Erzuli Freda
Lwa of beauty, love and femininity, but also associated with jealousy and vengeance.



Erzuli Dant
Protector of betrayed and abused women, and of children. Said to have fought with her people during the Revolution. She is associated with the Black Madonna.

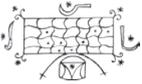


Agwe
Sovereign of the sea, with power over sea-life and ships. Associated with the revolution, he is often shown wearing military uniform.



Lasiren

Female counterpart of Agwe. Brings luck and money from the ocean.



Kouzen Zaka

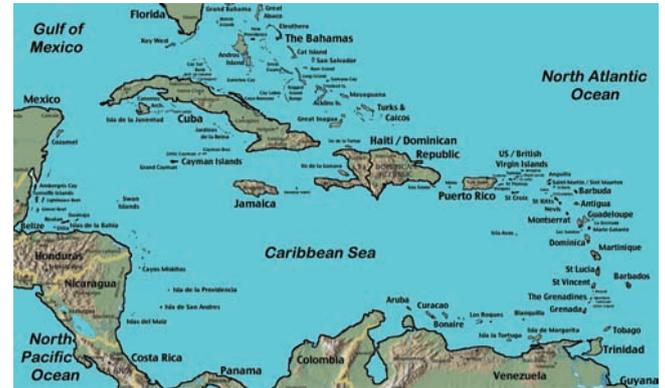
The minister of agriculture. He wears the blue denim, red neck scarf and straw sack of the traditional peasant.



Gran Bwa

Master of the sacred forest in Ginen, the kingdom of the lwa below the waters. Protector of wild animals, he knows the medicinal secrets of plants.

Haiti



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Front image:

Hector Hippolyte, Papa Zaca Papa Ogoun, c.1947. Courtesy Museum of Everything, London

Back image:

ANDRÉ PIERRE, Agane, 1980. Collection Galerie d'Art Nader, Port-au-Prince

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