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HAITIAN ART: EXPLORING CULTURAL IDENTITY



Hector Hyppolite (Haiti, 1894-1947), *Le President Florvil Hyppolite* (President Florvil Hyppolite), ca.1945-47.
Oil and pencil on paper, 30 x 24 inches. Museum purchase, Friends of Art Permanent Endowment Fund with assistance
from the Beaux Arts Fund Committee, Inc., 92.13

HAITIAN ART: EXPLORING CULTURAL IDENTITY

BY ANNE MARIE HAYES AND MICHELLE ROBINSON

(Recommended for High School Students)

Introduction and Historical Background

Haiti is located in the Caribbean, and along with the Dominican Republic makes up the island Hispaniola (Fig. 1). Two-thirds of the country is mountainous. Most of the population (95%) is Black and poor. In the 15th century Spanish explorers and soldiers conquered the indigenous peoples, and in the early 16th century, Spain began transporting slaves from Africa to search for gold. The French took control of Haiti in 1697 and named the colony *Saint Domingue*. The French colonists established prosperous sugar, cotton, and coffee plantations that depended upon the African slaves for labor.

In 1791 the African slaves rebelled against the French, whom they outnumbered nearly 11 to 1, and years of fighting ensued. Although Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the first successful slave revolt in history, was captured by French troops sent by Napoleon in 1803, Haiti achieved independence

on January 1, 1804. The only other republic in the Western Hemisphere at that time was the United States. From 1915-1934, U.S. troops occupied the island after concerns over political stability arose. This period of U.S. occupation was followed by the brutal dictatorships of François Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude. Elections were subverted until 1990 when Jean Bertrand Aristide, a Catholic priest, was elected President. In 1994 U.S. troops returned to Haiti to support Aristide's government following yet another revolution.

Haiti's historical events have influenced the way in which Haitians view themselves. Haitian artists come from varied social backgrounds and have different life experiences and artistic training. The four paintings discussed here express Haitian concerns, including politics and the role of *Vodou* in daily life. *Vodou*, a religion that is practiced by the majority of Haitians, is an important aspect of Haitian culture. However, it is perhaps one of the most misunderstood religions because of how it has been sensationalized in Hollywood movies.

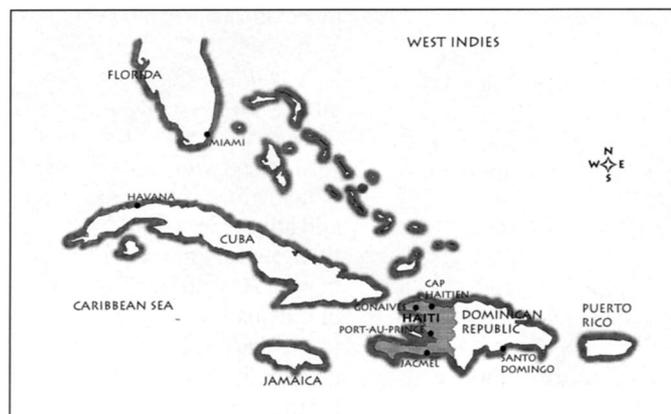


Figure 1.

Hector Hyppolite

Haiti, 1894-1947

Le President Florvil Hyppolite

(President Florvil Hyppolite), ca. 1945-47

Oil and pencil on paper

30" x 24"

Museum purchase, Friends of Art Permanent Endowment Fund with assistance from the Beaux Arts Fund Committee, Inc., 92.13

Discussion

Declaring independence from France in 1804 was a great victory, but maintaining political stability has been, and continues to be, a challenge for the government of Haiti. The first Haitian leader was assassinated 2 years after taking office, which resulted in the country being divided under two leaders until 1818. From 1843-1915, Haiti had 22 heads of state, 14 of whom were deposed by revolution. President Florvil Hyppolite's term (1889-1896) took place during these decades of instability. (The artist is not related to the President.)

This painting differs significantly from traditional Western portraits of heads of state, both in its intent and its appearance. Haitians would undoubtedly recognize that this portrait is structured after the Haitian coat of arms (Fig. 2). President Hyppolite replaces the palm tree that appears above the six wings. The palm tree is an important icon because it represents the strength and resiliency of the Haitian people. Red and blue, the colors of the Haitian flag, appear throughout the painting—as a decorative band

encircling Hyppolite, on his clothing, and in the floral elements. (Red and blue are also symbolic colors of *Ogou*, a Vodou spirit associated with military power.) Formal portraits of heads of state, as a rule, do not have decorative elements. In

this portrait, the colorful hibiscus blossoms, layered over the red and blue band, enliven the pictorial space and compete for attention with Hyppolite. Decorative flowers appear in many Hyppolite paintings, but the symbolic meaning is unknown. The significance of depicting Hyppolite's eyes as those of a snake rather than as human is also unknown. The fact that the artist was also a Vodou priest may or may not be important.

Some art historians have described Hector Hyppolite's bright colors, flattened perspective, and simplicity of technique as naïve. However, Hyppolite's expressive style appealed to DeWitt Peters, the first director *Le Centre d' Art*, the Port-au-Prince art center established in 1944. The French poet André Breton purchased Hyppolite's work in 1946 when visiting Haiti and subsequently organized an exhibition of his works in Paris. This international recognition was quite an

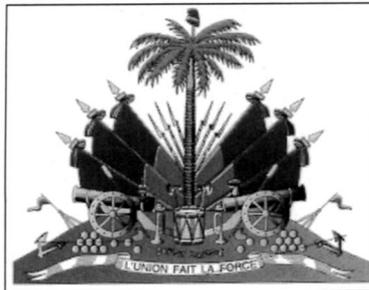


Figure 2.

accomplishment for a self-taught artist who also had supported himself by working as a cobbler, house painter, and innkeeper.

Activity

Have students research historical portraits of leaders or political figures and discuss how artists have used symbols to represent aspects of the person's personality or political views. Include a discussion of Hyppolite's symbols, in particular the significance of the palm tree. Have students create a portrait of a current or recent political leader, emphasizing the individual's personal character through his or her facial expression and other visual elements. Using the Hyppolite portrait as an example, the students may incorporate elements of the country's flag and "frame" the individual with meaningful symbols.

Evaluation

Critique portraits as a group. How did the students capture the character of the political leader? How did the students incorporate symbolic elements into the portrait? How are the students' personal feelings about the political leader demonstrated?

Edouard Duval-Carrié

Haiti, b. 1954

Azaka, Agro Rex (Azaka, King of Agriculture), 1979

Oil on canvas

48" x 108" (triptych)

Gift of Beaux Arts Fund Committee, Inc.
80.26

Discussion

Unlike most Haitian artists, Duval-Carrié has spent most of his life abroad: first in Puerto Rico, then Canada and France, and finally, the United States. He currently resides in Miami Beach. Despite his broad knowledge of art history and current trends in art, he chooses to paint traditional Haitian subjects, folklore, and legends. *Azaka, Agro Rex* is the first in a series of Vodou spirits that Duval-Carrié has painted. (Several years after this painting was completed, the artist was pleased to discover that a poster of it had made its way to the walls of a Vodou temple in Haiti.)

Vodou (also spelled *Voodoo*) is a religion that developed among the slave populations in Haiti. It is based primarily on west African religions. Notable elements include ancestor worship, spirit possession, and the use of song, drums, and dancing in ceremonies. To preserve African belief systems and adhere to colonial law (which forbid slaves to practice their own religions), *Saint Domingue* slaves blended elements of west African religions with Roman Catholicism, the religion of the Spanish and French colonists. For example, Catholic prayers are recited at the beginning of Vodou ceremonies, and chromolithographs of Catholic saints have been appropriated for many Vodou spirits.

(continued)



Edouard Duval-Carrié (Haiti, b. 1954), *Azaka, Agro Rex* (Azaka, King of Agriculture), 1979. Oil on canvas, 48 x 108 inches (triptych). Gift of Beaux Arts Fund Committee, Inc., 80.26.



Paul Claude Gardère (Haiti, b. 1944), *Madonna (Madame Duvalier)*, 1983. Acrylic on masonite panel, 33¾ inches by 48 inches.
Gift of Dr. Walter E. Neiswanger, M.D., 94.12.

Vodou spirits are called *lwa*. *Lwa* are similar to Catholic saints because people ask them for assistance or favor. Like Catholic saints, *lwa* have particular attributes and symbolic colors. Azaka (Papa Zaka) is the patron of agriculture. He is typically represented as a peasant farmer who wears denim and carries a woven straw sack over his shoulder to hold his lunch and his seeds. However, Duval-Carrié's creation looks more like a French aristocrat than a peasant farmer. Azaka's ruffled shirt and fitted jacket would be too hot for Haiti's hot, humid climate and certainly unsuitable for farming. Azaka and his fanciful pink horse are surrounded by the Haitian countryside that appears fertile. Yet, overpopulation and continued deforestation have made Haiti an ecological disaster. Duval-Carrié gave Azaka one blind eye for a reason.

The palm tree and serpent (in the side panels) also have religious significance. The palm tree is a natural *pòto-mitan*, the sacred center pole found in Vodou temples. Spirits invoked through ceremonies are believed to arrive through the *pòto-mitan* that connects the land of the living (people) with that of the dead (ancestors). The serpent wrapped around the palm tree is *Papa Danbala*, the ancient Vodou spirit representing the past and the continuity of generations.

Activity

Have students research artists who have affected change in the areas of politics, ecology, women's rights, or other social issues. Include a discussion of Duval-Carrié's representation of Papa Zaka as a commentary on the environmental crises in Haiti. Have students create an artwork about an ecological issue that concerns them. Students may work on individual pieces or create a group project. Students may incorporate slogans or other words to communicate their messages.

Evaluation

Critique the individual pieces as a group. What did students learn about the environmental problem through research? What did students learn about potential solutions for the problem? How did students communicate the need for concern and action on the part of the viewer?

Paul Claude Gardère

Haiti, b. 1944

Madonna (Madame Duvalier), 1983

Acrylic on masonite panel

33¾" x 48"

Gift of Dr. Walter E. Neiswanger, M.D.

94.12

Discussion

Paul Gardère is interested in cultural identity. While living in the United States as a young man, he wasn't sure whether to define himself as "Black" or "White" because he is a light-skinned *mulatto* (a term used in Haiti to describe a person with African and European ancestry). Some art gallery dealers also thought his work did not fit into the category of African-American art. In 1978, after living in the United States for 19

years, Gardère returned to Haiti. Six years later in 1984, he moved back to Brooklyn because he was concerned with Haiti's political situation.

Skin color has always been an issue in Haiti. Before independence, *mulattos* had more rights than Black slaves because they were *affranchis* ("freedmen"), but were still denied the political rights of the White colonists. After independence, *mulattos* became the elite—both politically and economically. Despite representing only about 5% of the population, *mulattos* were responsible for promoting French norms and models: French became Haiti's official language, and Roman Catholicism became Haiti's official religion. *Mulattos* still control wealth and political power in Haiti.

This satirical painting, loosely based on Christian madonna and child images, illustrates the artist's concerns about Baby Doc's leadership. Appointed President-for-Life at age 19 by his father, Baby Doc did not like politics and was initially happy to let his mother Simone and a circle of advisors govern Haiti for him. (Simone was expelled from Haiti in 1980, reportedly at the request of Jean-Claude's wife, Michèle Bennett.) Here, Baby Doc appears, literally, as a baby on the lap of his wife. Gardère also incorporated references to Vodou because Papa Doc understood the power of Vodou and used it to his advantage. The artist knew that Haitians would recognize a Black madonna as *Ezili Dantò*, a mother-warrior Vodou spirit known for her fierce protectiveness. In contrast, Michèle's relaxed pose and jewelry is associated with *Ezili Freda*, a mulatto Vodou spirit associated with sensuality and wealth. (Michèle's extravagant spending made her unpopular with the Haitian people.)

The white dog symbolizes the United States. In 1962 the United States cut off aid to Haiti due to increasing concerns about Papa Doc's repressive and authoritarian rule. Aid was restored in 1971 when Baby Doc assumed office. In 1986, however, U.S. aid was cut off again, and the Duvaliers were forced to flee to France.

Activity

Have students discuss how one would feel to be pressured to make a certain kind of art because of one's race and cultural background and to know that one could not display a controversial painting (such as this one) in one's own country for fear of punishment, even death. Have students create a mixed media piece about a political leader, professional athlete, or entertainer who has been corrupted by power and wealth. The students may incorporate drawings, paintings, photographs, symbols, and other media to draw attention to the individual's character flaws.

Evaluation

Critique the works of art as a group. How did the students use collage elements and symbols to emphasize the individual's personality and character flaws? How are the students' personal feelings about the individual demonstrated?

Bien-Aimé Sylvain

Haiti, b. 1936

Le Cimetière (The Cemetery), n.d.

Oil on masonite panel

36" x 48"

Gift of Dr. Walter E. Neiswanger, M.D.

85.33

Discussion

Haitian cemeteries have two special graves: the oldest grave of a male, and the oldest grave of a female. *Bawon Samdi* (the male) and *Gran Brijit* (the female) are the “parents” of the family of the dead, known as the *Gèdè*. The large cross (the *kwa Bawon*, or “Baron’s cross”) marks a special place in the cemetery: the crossing point of two cemetery paths. Baron Samdi dresses in black, and wears a black top hat. Someone has placed a black top hat on the *kwa Bawon*. The cross, itself, is an important Vodou symbol. It represents the intersection or crossroads of the horizontal plane (the mortal world) and the vertical plane (the spiritual world).

Sylvain’s painting depicts many of the social interactions that take place regularly at Haitian cemeteries. In Haiti, women are the principal ritualizers. They light candles, leave food offerings, plant flowers, attach metal floral wreaths to tombs, say private prayers, and hire *pretsavan* (bush priests) to recite prayers in Latin or French. A sign on the back cemetery walls tells visitors that the services of the *pretsavan* (shown here reading from books) can be obtained for an advance fee. The role of the bush priest developed during the first half of the 19th century when Rome refused to send Catholic priests to the new Black republic.

In the foreground, three individuals offer someone a cup of coffee. This small gift, along with a piece of hard yellow soap and a few pennies, marks the opening of an elaborate Vodou ritual called the *manje pov* (ritual feeding of the poor). This is an invitation to a sumptuous feast in the home of the family staging the ceremony. The poor are invited because they can bestow blessings obtainable from no other source.

Activity

Have students research ritual practices concerning death and mourning in other cultures, and compare them to ones practiced in their country. Include a discussion of cemetery rituals represented in the Sylvain painting. Have students research ritual objects associated with death (reliquaries, tombs, etc.) in other cultures and time periods. Have students create an object commemorating their lives using whatever media they choose.

Evaluation

Have students critique objects as a group. Did the students learn about other ritual practices concerning death and mourning in other cultures? Did the students learn about and understand the significance of ritual objects associated with death? Did the students create an object that is an appropriate representation of their lives?

Conclusion

Haiti’s culture is a fascinating blend of African, French, and Spanish influences. The four works discussed here show the richness of the culture—how Haitians view religion, politics, and daily life. Teachers and students are encouraged to explore the diverse and complex paintings and metal sculptures created by Haitian artists, both in Haiti and abroad.

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Pronunciation Guide

Édouard Duval-Carrié—“ed-war doo-VAHL car-ee-AY”

Paul Claude Gardère—“paul-clode gahr-DARE”

Gèdè—“geh-day”

Hector Hyppolite—“ec-tor IH-poh-LEET”

Lwa—“luh-wah”

Bien-Aimé Sylvain—“bee-AHN-ah-MAY sil-VAN”

Vodou—“VOH-doo”

Resources

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Bien-Aimé Sylvain (Haiti, b.1936), *Le Cimetière* (The Cemetery), n.d. Oil on masonite panel, 36 x 48 inches. Gift of Dr. Walter E. Neiswanger, M.D., 85.33.