

Spirit & Strength

Modern Art from Haiti

Like its global counterparts, Haitian modern art has a rich, multifaceted history. *Spirit & Strength* captures this complexity in paintings, textiles, and works on paper by some of Haiti's most significant artists.

The roots of Haitian modernism can be found in the Indigenist movement of the 1920s, when artists and writers came together to create a national identity inspired by folklore and popular culture. Over the next several decades, institutions like the Centre d'Art (established in 1944) supported and promoted the work of countless artists, many of whom are included in this exhibition. Instead of forming a new unifying movement, these artists developed their own styles based on personal interests, worldviews, social roles, and geographic locations. Their success brought international attention to Haitian art, particularly from African American artists.

Spirit & Strength moves from the earthly to the spiritual realm. Views of everyday life, historical events, landscapes, and political figures are followed by imagery featuring Vodou *lwas* (spirits) and biblical narratives. We close with works by African American artists who traveled to Haiti from the 1930s to the 1980s. Their art reflects the significance of Haitian history and culture in the wider African Diaspora. Taken as a whole, this broad range of artistic production from the past century demonstrates the remarkable spirit and enduring strength of art from Haiti.

National History and Everyday Life

Haiti became the world's first Black republic when the Haitian people won independence from France in 1804. Although they were then ostracized by the global community, Haitians endeavored to form an economy and establish their own democracy while honoring their traditions. The works in this room show how artists from the mid-20th to the early 21st century have portrayed the nation and its people. Many drew on personal experiences and local ways of life, focusing on the everyday humanity of the Haitian people. These images also shed light on historical events that were erased or obscured in coverage outside the country out of fear or denial of Black agency and liberation. From boisterous market scenes to solemn portraits of government officials and more, the art in this gallery gives us a richer understanding of past and present Haitian life.

Religion and Spirituality

Modern Haitian art features both Vodou and Christian imagery, highlighting the close relationship between these two religious traditions in Haitian society. Enslaved Vodou practitioners hid their forbidden rituals and deities behind a mask of Catholic faith. Today many Haitians practice both religions simultaneously. But Vodou is both a religion and a way of life in Haiti, so it is likewise the dominant theme of the artwork in this room. Expressive paintings and textile works depict the distinctive characters of the *lwas* (Vodou spirits). Some also include *vèvès*, geometric symbols that together form a language of signs, each used to invoke a particular *lwa* during rituals. Others draw on Vodou traditions to create surrealistic imagery that seems to occupy a space between dreams and reality.

Haitian Influence in African American Art

In the early 20th century, African American creatives began traveling outside the United States to work and study in places with a significant Black presence. Many found inspiration in Haiti's revolutionary history as the first free Black republic in the world. African American artists also identified with Haiti's struggles against racism and imperialism and were interested in exploring their shared African roots. These artists produced important work influenced by and depicting their time in Haiti. In some cases they transformed their entire artistic practice in response to their experiences. Travel to Haiti sharply declined from the 1980s onward, due to health crises, political conflicts, and natural disasters. But the cultural production of the island nation continues to be influential throughout the African Diaspora.

Hector Hyppolite

Haitian, 1894 – 1948

Houses by the Bay, c. 1944 – 1945

oil wash on cardboard

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Kay and Roderick Heller

Wilson Bigaud

Haitian, 1913 – 2010

Village Evening, 1962

oil on fiberboard

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Kay and Roderick Heller

Philomé Obin

Haitian, 1893 – 1977

**Paysans Sortant et Allant au Marché
(Villagers Going to the Market), 1953**

oil on board

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

Philomé Obin's painting depicts the evolving landscape of Cap-Haïtien, a city on the northern coast of Haiti. The lively street scene of people going to and from the market shows Cap-Haïtien as an economic center. Signs of modernization overlap with rural life, with utility poles and banana trees lining an unpaved road. A distant car fades into the horizon, while a barefoot woman on horseback and another carrying a tray of fruits on her head approach the foreground. Obin was one of the founders of a style of painting known as the Cap-Haïtien school, characterized by careful attention to street life and local architecture.

Rigaud Benoit

Haitian, 1911 – 1986

Woman Picking Mangos, 1969

oil on fiberboard

National Gallery of Art, Promised Gift of Kay and Roderick Heller

Louisiane Saint Fleurant

Haitian, 1924 – 2005

Mother with Children, 2001

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

Louisiane Saint Fleurant is known for her paintings of female figures and children set in vibrant landscapes. Here she has conveyed the intimacy of a family in an expressive, nearly abstract scene, grouping the figures tightly together and filling every space with color and patterns. Saint Fleurant began painting in her late 40s, becoming the oldest and only female artist of the Saint Soleil movement, which was characterized by abstracted figures and Vodou symbolism.

Wilson Bigaud

Haitian, 1913 – 2010

Section Chief, 1951

oil on fiberboard

National Gallery of Art, Promised Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

Section chiefs were prominent political and military figures responsible for collecting taxes, overseeing elections, and enforcing the law in rural areas of Haiti. Many Haitians thought of section chiefs as oppressors who abused their power. Wilson Bigaud's portrait of a section chief feels ominous, as the subject emerges from the darkness at right while lighting a tobacco pipe with downcast eyes. He wears a military uniform and police badge and carries a wooden cane beneath his arm, signifying his power to punish. The interplay of light and shadow creates volume, a characteristic feature of Bigaud's artistic style.

Philomé Obin

Haitian, 1893 – 1977

**President Tiresias Sam Entering
Cap-Haïtien, 1958**

oil on fiberboard

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Kay and Roderick Heller

Jasmin Joseph

Haitian, 1923 – 2005

The Fight, 1975

oil on board

National Gallery of Art, Promised Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

Jasmin Joseph's paintings often feature animals engaged in human activities. Sometimes they convey moral or religious themes, and sometimes they are satiric representations of public figures. The leaping wildcats that appear to roar and claw at each other in *The Fight* might refer to the political and economic upheaval of the time. From the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, tens of thousands of rural, working-class Haitians emigrated to the United States to escape the corrupt regime of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier (1971 – 1986).

Castera Bazile

Haitian, 1923 – 1966

Cockfight, 1962

oil on board

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

Cockfights are a popular Haitian pastime. Staged regularly across the country, the fights provide diversions from daily life and opportunities for people to win money, particularly in rural areas, where Castera Bazile's depiction is set. Before his premature death from tuberculosis at 43, Bazile became one of Haiti's most successful artists. His colorful portraits and scenes of daily life were shown in several exhibitions in Haiti, the United States, and Europe.

Rigaud Benoit

Haitian, 1911 – 1986

Marketplace, 1965

oil on fiberboard

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Kay and Roderick Heller

FAR LEFT

Pétion Savain

Haitian, 1906 – 1973

Haitian Farmer, 1965

oil on canvas

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African
American History and Culture

LEFT

Jacob Lawrence

American, 1917 – 2000

General Toussaint L'Ouverture, 1986

silkscreen

Mrs. Thelma Driskell, courtesy DC Moore Gallery, NY

The US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 prompted artists in both nations to reexamine Haitian history and culture. Jacob Lawrence was inspired by Haiti's revolutionary past. His portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture depicts the leader of the Haitian Revolution as a stately military officer. Based on his original tempera painting made between 1936 and 1938, this portrait celebrates the spirit of resistance in Haiti and throughout the Black Diaspora.

Pétion Savain, a key figure in Haiti's Indigenist movement, instead looked to rural communities for inspiration. *Haitian Farmer* presents an unnamed man dressed in a red shirt with rolled sleeves. The portrait underscores the vital role of the Black farmer in preserving Haitian traditions — a frequent theme in Savain's work. While the heroic general and humble farmer played different roles in Haitian history, they both have been important symbols of the nation.

Gérard Valcin

Haitian, 1927 – 1988

RaRaband, 1986

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Kay and Roderick Heller

Wilson Bigaud

Haitian, 1913 – 2010

Adam and Eve, 1953

oil on board

National Gallery of Art, Promised Gift of Beverly and
John Fox Sullivan

Rigaud Benoit

Haitian, 1911 – 1986

Annunciation, 1958

oil on fiberboard

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Kay and Roderick Heller

The Annunciation — the moment when Christians believe an angel told the Virgin Mary she would give birth to the son of God — has been a popular subject in art for more than a thousand years. Rigaud Benoit depicted Mary in her traditional red robe and blue veil with her hands held together in a gesture of prayer as the angel gives her the momentous news. But Benoit departed from tradition by giving Mary and the angel brown skin and curly black hair, associating them with the Haitian population. The tropical landscape also suggests Haiti as the setting for this biblical scene.

Louisiane Saint Fleurant

Haitian, 1924 – 2005

Woman with Three Heads, undated
oil on board

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

Hector Hyppolite

Haitian, 1894 – 1948

3 Marassa, 1947

oil on board

National Gallery of Art, Promised Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

Said to be a third-generation *houngan*, or male Vodou priest, Hector Hyppolite gravitated toward spiritual themes in his art. In Haitian Vodou, twins are believed to possess great powers because they represent the transitional space between the living and the dead. The child born after a set of twins completes a set of three, a sacred number. The three “twins” are known as the *marassa*. Hyppolite represents the *marassa* as three identical figures wearing different colors. The colorful flowers framing them are typical of his style, which blends elements of the natural and supernatural.

Edouard Duval-Carrié

American, born Haiti, 1954

**L'Aesthete Hindu
(The Hindu Aesthete), 1990**
oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Kay and Roderick Heller

Edouard Duval-Carrié is known for his surrealistic, spiritual portraiture. In *L'Aesthete Hindu*, a mysterious smoking figure is surrounded by symbolic objects on an artist-made frame. Positive and negative signs and an electric switch flank the figure, alluding to binary oppositions. Yet the subject — with their painted nails and mustache — appears to defy traditional notions of a gender binary. Born in Port-au-Prince and currently based in Miami, Duval-Carrié and his family migrated to Puerto Rico during the François “Papa Doc” Duvalier regime (1957 – 1971).

RIGHT

Myrlande Constant

Haitian, born 1968

Moudongue Massai, undated
beads and sequins on fabric

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

FAR RIGHT

Myrlande Constant

Haitian, born 1968

Guede Djable 2 Cornes, undated
beads and sequins on fabric

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

This work depicts Guede, the black-colored spirit that represents death. A live snake writhes around his neck as he brandishes a sword and a decapitated head. Textile artist Myrlande Constant pioneered a new style of *drapo* (a Vodou ceremonial flag) featuring ornate, densely beaded symbols and mythical narratives. Constant has described her textile work as “painting with beads.”

Gérard Valcin

Haitian, 1927 – 1988

Papa Zaca, 1969

oil on fiberboard

National Gallery of Art, Promised Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

Papa Zaca represents the patron *lwa*, or spirit, of agriculture in Haitian Vodou. Barefoot, smoking a pipe, and dressed in blue denim and a straw hat, he takes the guise of a farmer. He sits on the ground surrounded by objects. The tasseled bag to his right, known as a *makout*, is the emblem most associated with him. Papa Zaca likes the number three, so groups of three appear throughout the painting — three mice, three drums, three candles, three cups, and so on. The vibrant colors are typical of Gérard Valcin's work, which often conveys a sense of playfulness. His early career as a tile setter may be the inspiration for the symmetrical composition and patterned linework seen on the brick wall in the background.

LEFT

Andre Pierre

Haitian, 1916 – 2005

Baron Samedi Diptych, undated
oil on fiberboard

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan

Artist and *houngan* (male Vodou priest) Andre Pierre was regarded as the spiritual successor to the legendary Hector Hyppolite as the preeminent painter of *lwas* (spirits). Pierre's first paintings were made inside hollowed gourds used for ceremonial offerings to the *lwas*. In the 1950s he began to paint on board and canvas. Pierre wanted to show that Vodou is as respectable and important as other major world religions. He created intensely colored and lovingly detailed portraits of Vodou subjects, from *lwas* like Baron Samedi, the chaotic ruler of the afterlife, to a *mambo* (female Vodou priest).

RIGHT

Andre Pierre

Haitian, 1916 – 2005

Mambo, early 1960s
oil on fiberboard

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Kay and Roderick Heller

William Edouard Scott

American, 1884 – 1964

Haitian Women, c. 1945

oil on panel

Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson

Aaron Douglas

American, 1899 – 1979

Haitian Street Scene, 1938

oil on canvas

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Melvin Holmes Collection of African American Art

A leading artist of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and '30s, Aaron Douglas traveled to Haiti in 1938 with a grant from the Rosenwald Fund. His paintings from this time are more realistic than his previous work, capturing the natural beauty of the Caribbean nation. In *Haitian Street Scene*, Douglas departs from his typical large, bold, and expressive silhouettes in favor of an intimate composition depicting Haitians passing by a tin-roofed garage in an idyllic, sunlit setting.

William Edouard Scott

American, 1884 – 1964

Haitian Drummer, c. 1945

oil on panel

Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson

In 1931 William Edouard Scott traveled to Haiti, where he produced a large body of oil paintings, watercolors, and pencil sketches capturing Haitian customs and everyday life. Scott took a special interest in markets — as seen in *Haitian Women*, on display nearby — believing that they represented a cross section of Haitian society. This portrayal of a drummer demonstrates his examination of African influences in Haitian culture. As one of the first American artists to visit Haiti during the US occupation (1915 – 1934), Scott had a lasting influence on later artists, including the Haitian artist Pétion Savain.

Eldzier Cortor

American, 1916 – 2015

L'Abbattoire No. 1 (Slaughterhouse No. 1),

1949

color woodcut

National Gallery of Art, Reba and Dave Williams Collection,
Florian Carr Fund and Gift of the Print Research Foundation

In 1949 Eldzier Cortor was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. The award allowed him to study and work in Haiti, where he taught at the Centre d'Art and met other artists, such as Harlan Jackson. The abstracted imagery of Cortor's slaughterhouse works was a departure from his signature Black female figures. The tangled forms of *L'Abbattoire No. 1* are largely illegible, except for hooks, chains, and ropes that allude to the work of a slaughterhouse. Shapes and colors bleed into each other in a composition that refuses clarity, perhaps reflecting Cortor's perspective as an American outsider in Haiti.

Harlan Jackson

American, 1918 – 1993

Untitled (Mask), 1950

oil on canvas

Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson

Harlan Jackson traveled to Haiti in 1948 to explore the presence of African cultural traditions. During his time there, he developed a particular interest in the rituals and ceremonies of Haitian Vodou. The mask highlights African influences while also echoing the artistic legacy of the early 20th-century modernists. An eye peeking through a triangular opening underscores Jackson's interest in the human element of the cultural practices he explored.

Betye Saar

American, born 1926

Mystic Sky with Self-Portrait, 1992

color offset lithograph with collage

National Gallery of Art, Gift of Funds from the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation

Mystic Sky with Self-Portrait demonstrates Betye Saar's fascination with the rituals and imagery of Vodou and other spiritual systems. A heart at the center resembles the Vodou symbols known as vèvès. The eye within a pyramid to the right is another symbol derived from Vodou. A self-portrait in the lower right corner reminds us of the artist and her engagement with these traditions. Saar visited Haiti in 1974 and again in 1978. Much of her work draws inspiration from mysticism and the spiritual practices she encountered during her international travels.

Lois Mailou Jones

American, 1905 – 1998

Vèvè Vodou III, 1997

serigraph

The Driskell Center, University of Maryland,
Gift from the Jean and Robert E. Steele Collection

Lois Mailou Jones made many trips to Haiti beginning in the summer of 1954. While her earlier Haitian subjects were landscapes and portraits, *Vèvè Vodou III* is representative of the abstract style she later developed in response to the visual culture of Vodou. Based on an earlier painting, the composition is a collage of multiple images and symbols, a visualization of the “new vocabulary” she had learned from Vodou. The graphic symbols associated with the *lwas*, or spirits, are known as *vèvès*. Here we can see the *vèvè* of Loco Atissou, the *lwa* associated with healing.

Lois Mailou Jones

American, 1905 – 1998

The Green Door, 1981 watercolor over graphite

National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection
(Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund, 1991)

nga.gov/Corcoran

Apse of Holy Trinity Cathedral, Port-au-Prince

Holy Trinity Cathedral, the main cathedral of the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti, once stood in the center of Port-au-Prince. In the late 1940s, a group of Haitian artists was invited by the church to decorate the inside of the cathedral with scenes from the Bible. Three artists worked together to paint the apse. On the left is a painting of the birth of Jesus Christ by Rigaud Benoit. In the middle is a work by Philomé Obin depicting Christ's crucifixion. And on the right is Castera Bazile's painting of Christ rising from the dead. The artists reimagined these biblical scenes with modern Haitian figures. Unfortunately most of the cathedral (pictured below) was destroyed in a devastating earthquake in 2010.



Left: photograph by Ron Mayhew
Photomural: Album / Superstock

**Learn about Haitian art, history, and culture
through a selection of books for adults and children.**

**Visit the *Spirit & Strength* pop-up library in the Library Atrium
on the Ground Level for further reading.**

**What colors drew your attention as you moved through the exhibition?
Take a moment to color in a work of art from the nearby galleries.**

Take your creation home and share with your friends or family.

Take your creation home and share with your friends or family.



**The soundtrack in this gallery represents
Haitian music traditions, such as rara,
merengue, and Vodou. The songs come
from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.**

Learn more at folkways.si.edu.