

The

# *Art of Haiti*

Loas, History, and Memory





*Trois Loas*  
Prospère Pierre-Louis, 1981  
Acrylic on chipboard  
Permanent collection, le Centre d'Art, Port-au-Prince, Haiti  
Photo: Gasner François, le Centre d'Art

ON THE COVER

*La Sirène*  
Ralph Allen, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo: Scott Bauer Photography

February 10 - May 20, 2018

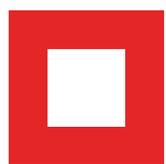
The  
*Art of Haiti*

Loas, History, and Memory

*Curated by Dr. Anthony Bogues*

*Asa Messer Professor of Humanities and Critical Theory  
Director, Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice  
Professor, Africana Studies  
Brown University*

This exhibition is presented in collaboration with  
le Centre d'Art, Port-au-Prince, Haiti



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# **The Art of Haiti**

## *Loas, History, and Memory*

Featuring early 20th-century Haitian art in conversation with works by contemporary artists Edouard Duval-Carrié, Tessa Mars, and Ralph Allen, this exhibition highlights how religion, history, and memory intertwine to create a sophisticated contemporary Haitian aesthetic. It focuses on three themes: *the influence of history and memory; the omnipresence of the Loas—the multiple spirits of the Vodou religion—in everyday life; the re-working of previous artistic forms.* The exhibition offers a new lens through which to consider Haitian art, and challenges the typical consideration of this work as primarily “exotic” or “naïve.”

The rich artistic traditions of Haiti are rooted in the complex histories of the African Diaspora’s relationship to slavery and European colonialism. In the 1700s, the French colony of Saint-Domingue was the world’s wealthiest colony. The enslaved African captives in the colony of Saint-Domingue came from many African nations in Central and West Africa. They arrived in the New World carrying ideas of life and death and what it meant to be human beings; they brought their gods and their ideas about religion. These enslaved Africans performed slave labor together on plantations, and carved out spaces for themselves in Maroon (escaped slave) communities, in opposition to the power of the French authorities. Away from the slave plantations, they learned techniques of survival and created a unique religious practice—Vodou.

By the time of the Haiti revolution in 1791, Vodou was the major religious order of the slaves. This religious order explained life, death, and the everyday. As an

Afro-Caribbean form, it populated its symbolic world with spirits (Loas) who, while themselves African in function and form, sometimes drew from French Catholicism. It was through and with these Loas that the African slaves fought for freedom.

Between 1791 and 1804, the enslaved population of Saint-Domingue overthrew slavery and French colonialism, creating the independent black republic of Haiti. This profound historical event generated new cultural and political practices. Post revolution, the Republic of Haiti has endured political conflicts, authoritarian regimes, and occupations, as well as demands by the French state for compensation for lost property—including the freed African slaves. It has also experienced horrific natural disasters.

Art in the African Diaspora presents a visual language that portrays marginal histories and forgotten stories. Haitian art forcefully raises the relationship between art, history, politics, and memory and bears witness to the richness, vitality, and intricacy of Haitian culture.

Within the Haitian artistic tradition, memory functions as an alternative archive and a catalyst for a complex understanding of history. Haitian art is a form of African diasporic expression created by the historic conditions of Atlantic slavery and European colonialism. Haitian art demonstrates the ways in which those who were formerly slaves—and were therefore marked as non-human—constructed their humanness. *The Art of Haiti: Loas, History, and Memory* gives us a slice of how new Afro-Caribbean practices emerged from historical conditions and were transformed into an art form.

—Dr. Anthony Bogues, Curator



ABOUT THE ARTIST

*Edouard Duval-Carrié*

Considered to be one of the leading Haitian artists of his generation, Duval-Carrié is an exceptional colorist working in mixed media. His work draws heavily from the symbolic pantheon of Vodou. In his art however, the Loas are made to represent his own concerns about the present. His work is heavily shaped by an acute historical sense. He has exhibited widely in Europe, the Caribbean, Latin America and the USA. He studied in Montréal, Canada. In 2016, he was awarded the medal of Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government.

*Memory Window #1*

Eduard Duval-Carrié, 2017

Plexiglas in artist's frame

Courtesy of the artist

Photo: Rafael Ramos-López



*Dreaming the Ancestors*

Tessa Mars, 2017

Mixed media on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

ABOUT THE ARTIST

*Tessa Mars* is a contemporary Haitian artist whose work addresses the early 20th-century traditions of Haitian art. Working in collage and mixed media, she has begun to create a body of work in which issues of gender and sexuality are foregrounded within frames of everyday Vodou practices. She studied visual arts in France at Rennes 2 University and has had residencies in New York and the Caribbean.



# Key Dates in Haitian History



**1492:** Christopher Columbus seizes the island of Hispaniola, declaring it a Spanish colony.

**1625:** The island is split between Spain and France, and the French colony of Saint-Domingue is created.



**1828:** Haiti pays the first installment of 30 million francs to France.

**1844:** Dominican Republic is founded after a war against Haiti.

**1862:** The United States formally recognizes Haiti.

**1915 - 1934:** Occupation of Haiti by the United States.



**1791 - 1801:** Haitian revolution, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, overthrows slavery and an 1801 constitution decrees the abolishment of slavery.

**1957 - 1971:** Presidential term of François Duvalier, characterized by violence and persecution.



**1804:** After the War of Independence against the French, led by ex-slave Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the colony of Saint-Domingue becomes politically independent and is renamed Haiti.



**1976:** Mass protest against Jean-Claude Duvalier, “Baby Doc,” son of François Duvalier.

**1986:** Mass protest dislodges the regime of “Baby Doc” and the United States makes arrangements for the dictator to be exiled in France. His leaving brings a close to the Duvalier Era.

**1811 - 1820:** The Kingdom of Haiti is declared by Henri Christophe in the northern part of the island, while in the south, Alexandre Pétion rules.

**1990:** Democratic elections take place and Jean-Bertrand Aristide is elected by popular acclaim.



**1820:** Haiti is unified under the rule of Jean-Pierre Boyer.

**1991:** The Haitian military overthrows Aristide.

**1822:** Boyer enters the Spanish section of Hispaniola to free slaves and politically reunite the divided island.

**1994:** President Aristide returns to Haiti from exile and is president from 1994 to 1996 and then from 2001 to 2004 when he was again ousted in a coup d'état.

**1825:** France conditionally recognizes Haitian independence with an indemnity of 150 million francs.

**2010:** A magnitude seven earthquake strikes Haiti.

# Roots of Liberty

## POEMS IN THREE VOICES

### 1<sup>st</sup> Slave:

#### Incantation

The sky let loose its thunder  
At the center of our chests.  
Voices clamored as lightning,  
Electrified veins, charging wills.  
Hungry hands cracked beats  
On sacred pig's skin  
Fusing sharp sounds  
Into our spines  
To resist colonial pain  
Resounding brute plantations.  
Our feet planted on blood soil,  
Readied to smash and rumble,  
Transforming pain into strength.  
Our limbs became cedar, hardwood.  
We blasted the air with turbulent dance.  
*Boukman* fiercely bellowed at the temple  
As we morphed into a thousand daggers.  
Cracked whips, wounds licked,  
Drums moaning underneath hands,  
We danced into a stormy communion.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Slave:

#### Incantation

From dawn to dusk under the unforgiving tropical heat  
The serenade of whips heated skins, sculpted backs  
Wilted dreams under the scorching sun.  
Thousands of wilted skins turned into weeping willows.  
The wind churned in windmills to gorge drained limbs  
And crushed canes. Torches flickered in the pits  
Of mountains where heated drums staggered Napoleonic  
Heels into a Congo dance that out-stepped the macabre waltz.  
Many promises made but none kept by the sugar sweetened  
Desires of landowners, like Rigaud, claiming superiority.  
His mulatto skin sought control in order to closely waltz  
With the French under the cadence of the whipping whips.  
Material wealth was valued less than liberty and your sword  
Slashed thickets and thorns that blocked the path to brotherhood.  
Despite your holdings, your sharp glimmering sword slashing  
gluttony across the island, forcing battered wills to stand.

You were our first General, the root of many roots who understood  
The language of the crossroads. Not perfect, you were substance.  
You blazed the opening, as you swiftly unified Saint-Domingue  
Through the wrath of iron-spiked slavery. Then you were betrayed.

They wanted you disappeared without a whistle of a tongue,  
A bell of a mouth, so your sword-like fingers could no longer  
Weed-out *Marseillean* thorns. They wanted you splintered out  
Of existence like a shattered mirror, irreversible, irreparable.

Why did you put down your guard? Colonists with conniving guns  
kneel only to glimmer. You, sir, a crystal of a man, know the abundance  
of light. Since your capture, despite the formidable force of the French,  
our tenacious mouths cried *liberty or death* and our cannons blazed your light.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Slave:**

#### **The Burning Victory**

The Northern town of Cap-Haitian and surrounding plantations  
Burned like molasses. Crackling & hot wind engulfed the heartland.

At nightfall, the burning lights rivaled the sun as days and nights  
Merged under our torches. Dessalines gave the orders to rid

The land of temptations: no plantations, no French, no slavery.  
Sugar, cotton and indigo were our curse as the insatiable French

Appetite grew colossal. The colonies were gobbled with lives rendered  
Meaningless, short-lived, crushed, brutalized for cane juice. Crystallized.

Our future darkened by treachery, Toussaint's dreams had to be rooted  
So the clanking of rusted chains would stop consuming our meager joys.

Our umbilical cords atrophied by enslavement strangled sugar empires  
As machete-wielding hands shredded tricolored cockades, we danced through fires.

Dessalines gave the orders to rid the land of temptations, burning  
The stocks of slavery to its roots and rooting liberty with bayonets.

– Patrick Sylvain

*Patrick Sylvain* is a leading Haitian-American poet, writer, social critic, and photographer who is currently the Shirle Dorothy Robbins Creative Writing Fellow at Brandeis University.

# Glossary of Terms

**Vodou:** A traditional Afro-Haitian religion; a worldview encompassing philosophy, medicine, justice, and religion. A fundamental principle of Vodou is the existence of God as the supreme being, but he is too busy to be involved in mundane human affairs, and instead created a set of Loas, (spirits) to intervene when needed.

**Loas:** The spirits of the Vodou religion practiced in Haiti. There are many Loas, each with a specific set of attributes. One of the most important Loas is Legba. He is known as the spirit of the crossroads. The Loas are designated colors; Legba's are red, orange, and yellow. Another important Loa is Erzili Freda, the spirit of love. Her symbol is the heart and her color is pink. There are two Erzilis; the second is Erzili Danto, the spirit of motherhood. Her colors are red and blue. Many of the Loas have Catholic counterparts. Erzili Freda corresponds to the Virgin Mary and Erzili Danto's counterpart is the Black Madonna.

**African Diaspora:** Historically the term commonly used to describe the forced, mass dispersion of peoples from Africa during the Transatlantic Slave Trades from the 1500s to the 1800s. This trade took more than 12 million people from Western and Central Africa to regions throughout the Americas and the Caribbean.

**Maroon:** African slaves who fled to remote mountainous areas were called **marron** (French) or **mawon** (Haitian-Creole), meaning "escaped slave." Maroon communities were free zones during slavery, and in Haiti, many of them became the regular fighting force against slavery and French colonialism.



*Grand Ibole*  
André Pierre  
Oil on canvas

Permanent collection, le Centre d'Art, Port-au-Prince, Haiti  
Photo: Gasner François, le Centre d'Art

# Key Political Figures

## **Toussaint L'Ouverture** (1743 - 1803)

Leader of the revolutionary slave army which defeated the French and overthrew the social system of plantation slavery. He negotiated for the French colony on Hispaniola (Saint-Domingue) to be governed briefly by black former slaves as a French colony with dominion status. He was captured in 1802 by the French military sent by Napoléon Bonaparte to restore slavery. He was later taken to France where he died in prison in Fort de Joux.

## **Jean-Jacques Dessalines** (1758 - 1806)

A former slave and second in command to Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines led the Haitian revolutionaries to victory in 1804. He served as the first leader of the independent country, as Emperor Jacques I (1804 - 06). Dessalines proclaimed independence in 1804 with the words, "In the end we must live independent or die."

## **Henry Christophe** (1767 - 1820)

A leader in the war for Haitian independence (1791 - 1804) and later President (1807 - 11) and self-proclaimed King Henry I (1811 - 20) of northern Haiti.

## **François Duvalier** (1907 - 1971)

President of Haiti from 1957 until his death in 1971. Trained as a physician and known to Haitians as "Papa Doc," Duvalier's tenure was characterized by violence, torture, and the disappearance of many who opposed his rule.

## **Jean-Bertrand Aristide** (1953 - present)

The first democratically elected president of Haiti after the fall of the Duvalier regimes. A former Catholic priest, he became a political figure and leader of the Lavalas movement. After winning the election in 1991, he was deposed in 1992. He returned in 1994 and was president until 1996. He was elected again to serve from 2000 to 2004, after which he was deposed and forced into exile.

*Haiti Liberée (Haiti Liberty)*

Ralph Allen, 1986

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Photo: Scott Bauer Photography





*Notre Promenade, Peters, Obin et Chenet allant au Carrefour*

Philomé Obin, circa 1950

Oil on chipboard

Permanent collection, le Centre d'Art, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Photo: Gasner François, le Centre d'Art



#### ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

*Ralph Allen* is an accomplished Haitian artist whose work spans murals and painting. Committed to an artistic practice of public art, he has created many murals. Late 20th-century politics haunts his work and he returns often to the terror of the Duvalier period. Trained in New York at the National Academy Museum and Art School, Allen does not belong to any specific Haitian school of painting and is often considered as working outside these different genres.