



SACRED DIAGRAMMS

HAITIAN VODOU FLAGS FROM THE GESSEN COLLECTION



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Co-edited by Edouard Duval-Carrié and Joanna Robotham

Organized by



Tampa Museum of Art

This book is published in conjunction with the exhibition *Sacred Diagrams: Haitian Vodou Flags from the Gessen Collection*, an exhibition organized by the Tampa Museum of Art.

Tampa Museum of Art

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COVER:

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Clotaire Bazile (Haitian, b. 1950), *Dambala Wedo Tokan* (detail), 1983. Sequins and beads on cloth. 30 x 37 inches. Collection of Ed and Ann Gessen.

FRONTISPIECE: Myrlande Constant (Haitian, b. 1968), *Ogue Ferraille* (detail), 2004. Sequins and bugle beads on cloth. 42 x 48 inches. Collection of Ed and Ann Gessen.

PAGE 27: Artist Unknown, *Dambala Werdo* (Sacred Pair) (detail), 1950s. Sequins and beads on cloth. 29 x 29 inches. Collection of Ed and Ann Gessen.

INSIDE BACK COVER: Artist Unknown, *Legba* (detail), 1950. Sequins and beads on cloth, 26 x 30 inches. Collection of Ed and Ann Gessen.

BACK COVER: Georges Valris (Haitian, b. 1953), *Banda (Dancing Ghede)* (detail), 2000. Sequins and beads on cloth. 41 x 35 inches. Collection of Ed and Ann Gessen.

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FOREWORD

Sacred Diagrams: Haitian Vodou Flags from the Gessen Collection presents nearly seventy flags from one of the largest collections of Vodou flags in the United States, if not the world. The Gessen Collection, based in the Tampa Bay area, demonstrates the significance of Haiti's diverse artistic traditions, many of which are unknown to American museum audiences. This exhibition, brilliantly curated by artist and scholar Edouard Duval-Carrié, reflects the Tampa Museum of Art's mission to introduce the region to important artists and objects relevant and meaningful to our community. Without a doubt, our Board, staff, and visitors will remember *Sacred Diagrams* as one of the Museum's landmark exhibitions for the quality and beauty of the artwork, and the contributions made to the scholarship of twentieth-century Haitian art.

This exhibition is one of three exhibitions presented in the fall 2019 season, entitled *Ordinary/Extraordinary: Assemblage in Three Acts*. Organized by Joanna Robotham, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, the season offers three discrete shows highlighting artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Purvis Young, as well as an overview of Haitian Vodou flags. I congratulate Joanna on curating this ambitious exhibition series.

On behalf of the Tampa Museum of Art, I would like to extend my gratitude to Ed and Ann Gessen for sharing their esteemed collection of Haitian Vodou flags with our institution. Their knowledge and enthusiasm for Haitian art has inspired the Museum staff and me for the past year, and now our visitors will see the breadth and range of their flag collection. I would also like to thank Edouard Duval-Carrié for collaborating with the Museum on this significant exhibition. His creative approach and scholarly interpretation of Vodou flag traditions sheds new light on an art form distinct to Haiti.

I share my deep appreciation to Kay and Roderick Heller for their exhibition and publication support for *Sacred Diagrams: Haitian Vodou Flags from the Gessen Collection*. The Hellers' continued interest and generosity toward the Tampa Museum of Art is received with gratitude from our community at large. Avid collectors of Haitian art themselves, the Hellers have been enthusiastic about our interest in highlighting the Caribbean in our exhibition and education programs. Many patrons and visitors will recall the exhibition Kay organized, entitled *Island Delights: The Spirit and Passion of Haitian Art* (2000), the first survey of Haitian art at the Tampa Museum of Art.

The Tampa Museum of Art is thankful for the generosity of the funders who made the exhibition season *Ordinary/Extraordinary: Assemblage in Three Acts* possible, including the National Endowment for the Arts, with additional support provided by Deborah Brittain, Murial Braithwaite, Dr. Willie Logan and Lyra Blizzard, and Bales Security.

As always, I am thankful for the support of the Board of Trustees and the Foundation Board of Directors at the Tampa Museum of Art. Their commitment to our mission and financial generosity assists the Museum in organizing major initiatives like the *Ordinary/Extraordinary* exhibition season. Furthermore, I extend my gratitude to the staff of the Tampa Museum of Art for their continued efforts and dedication in making our institution the city's preeminent art museum.

MICHAEL A. TOMOR, Ph.D.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ordinary/Extraordinary: Assemblage in Three Acts

Jean-Michel Basquiat: One Master Artist / Two Masterpieces, Purvis Young: 91, and Sacred Diagrams: Haitian Vodou Flags from the Gessen Collection

The exhibition season *Ordinary/Extraordinary: Assemblage in Three Acts* simultaneously presents three unique shows focused on works by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Purvis Young, and a selection of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Haitian Vodou flags. The use of found objects, such as discarded wood and repurposed textiles, formally links the exhibitions together. More importantly, historical and socioeconomic narratives informed by the Afro-Caribbean diaspora and the black experience in the United States, as well as European artistic influences, unite the artists featured in *Ordinary/Extraordinary*. Although each exhibition is a stand-alone show, viewed together, the series explores provocative portrayals of race, spirituality, and courage in a diverse range of objects and compositions.

Sacred Diagrams: Haitian Vodou Flags from the Gessen Collection is organized by guest curator Edouard Duval-Carrié, an esteemed artist and scholar of Haitian art. The exhibition aims to dispel the stereotypes and Western misconceptions of Vodou and looks closely at one genre of creative production in Haiti. *Drapo Vodou*, or Vodou flags, are the most revered form of Haiti's sacred arts. The extraordinary craftsmanship of the flags has elevated these ritual objects from craft to high art, and today drapo Vodou are coveted by collectors around the world. Each flag features approximately 20,000 sequins and beads, hand stitched by artists trained in the tradition of drapo Vodou. Edouard's selection of flags illustrates the evolution of drapo Vodou over the past seventy-five years and illuminates an artistic practice unique to Haiti and its capital of Port-au-Prince.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to work with Edouard, an artist of international stature and widely respected in South Florida, on the planning of *Sacred Diagrams*. Edouard's knowledge and passion for Haitian art continues to inspire me. Over the course of the past year, we have had many spirited conversations about Haiti and the Caribbean, as well as the history and future of Haitian art. For generously sharing their collection with the Tampa Museum of Art, I extend my sincere thanks to Ed and Ann Gessen. It has been a pleasure getting to know the Gessens over the past year; each visit to their home brought a new level of appreciation for the artists and objects in their collection. One can't help but admire their dedication to Haitian art and its traditions, especially Vodou flags.

With gratitude, I thank Kay Heller for sharing with me her longstanding love of Haiti. Kay and her husband Rodrick have been collecting Haitian art for several decades, and together they have gifted several works of Haitian art to the Tampa Museum of Art's permanent collection. I appreciate the Hellers' support of *Sacred Diagrams* and its accompany publication.

The exhibition series *Ordinary/Extraordinary*, of which *Sacred Diagrams* is part, could not have been accomplished without the leadership and staff at the Tampa Museum of Art. I thank our Executive Director, Michael A. Tomor, for his continued support of my curatorial work and for always offering thoughtful suggestions and advice on my projects. I am also indebted to the curatorial team—Emily McVeigh, former Exhibitions and Collections Manager; Matthew Mangold, Chief Preparator and Exhibition Designer; Philip Ladeau, Preparator; Greer Mehler, Preparator; and Suzanne Williamson, Curatorial Department Assistant—for helping me realize *Ordinary/Extraordinary: Assemblage in Three Acts*.

JOANNA ROBOTHAM
CURATOR OF MODERN AND
CONTEMPORARY ART

DRAPO VODOU

EDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ

There is a saying in Haiti: “We are 90 percent Catholic and 90 percent Vodou!” While this adage may be far from reality—Haiti’s last national census took place in the 1950s and it did not record religious affiliation—it only takes one encounter with the rites of Vodou to reveal its true power among the Haitian people.

When I was a child, my family lived in Petion Ville, a small city nestled in the hills just south of Port-au-Prince, where professional elites of mixed blood lived. At the center of the town was a central plaza, dominated on one side by a church and on the other by school administered by the Saint Esprits brotherhood. Due to the extreme terrain of the region, with its deep ravines and sharp ledges, there were many pockets of the town that had not been developed. One such area, Dezermite, was nearby our house. Every so often, festivals took place there that my nanny, Famicide, simply could not miss. Etched in my memory is the time she took me along to one of those events, which she referred to as a “fête champêtre,” loosely translated as a rural party.

This particular rural party took place across one of the ravines from our house in a small chapel built by Spanish Jesuits in the seventeenth century. Notre Dame des Hermites was not a church officiated by an ordained cleric, hence the presence that afternoon of a frère, or brother, from the Catholic school in town. A large crowd milled among vendors of sweets and cool beverages adjacent to the chapel. Women dressed in white with scarves on their heads wrapped “à la Senegalaise” were praying with rosaries in hand, while others were singing hymns to the Virgin of the Hermits in unison. My caretaker joined these women, and they spent the rest of the afternoon fervently chanting. The brother came over and asked me to join him in the chapel, which contained a simple table with candles serving as an altar, where he offered a prayer to the Virgin. He ushered me through the dense group that had gathered

to listen, and I stood beside him as he made a short speech to remind them that the chapel was under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church and that it was sacrilegious to use it for any other form of ritual.

The singing continued and, after a few sweetened ices, dusk came. And with it started the drumming. The cohort of ladies, including Famicide, then abruptly switched from their classic French hymns to Creole chants to the mother goddess Erzulie. Then the dancing—the real fête champêtre—started. At one point Famicide ushered me again into the chapel, where the austere afternoon décor had been transformed into a vision of candles, gridapes (kerosene lamps of local manufacture), and, most dramatic of all, a profusion of sequined wall hangings. The banners shimmered in the flickering light, the effect of which was tantamount to magic.

That afternoon I discovered that not only was Vodou a social affair not to be missed for Famicide, but that it was also a powerful experience that marked me. I realized that there was an aesthetic level to these events that clearly extolled the cultural background of the people involved, their beliefs, and, most of all, their identity. Also evident that afternoon was the fluidity with which the singing devotees easily switched from Catholic hymns to well-rehearsed Vodou chants. This recalls the vacuum of faith created by the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), when the French clergy fled along with the last of the French plantation owners to places such as New Orleans, Cuba, Florida, or back to France. But that these clergy did return to Haiti to be plagued, as they saw it, with this amalgamation of religions, is nonetheless a fait accompli!

Now, many decades later, I have been invited to curate this exhibition of Vodou flags assembled by Ed and Ann Gessen. It has been truly a delightful enterprise, and I have

had the chance to reflect on that first encounter with this art form—which was probably my first experience with Haitian cultural and artistic production. In their manufacture, these flags are clearly unique to Haiti, even though the basic materials used in their creation are not of Haitian provenance. *Drapo Vodou* (Vodou flags) are made of sequins, beads, golden ribbons, and ropes, among other things, which are hand sewn onto various types of fabric, from simple burlap to velvet and satin. The oldest of those I have seen contain metal sequins and real glass beads that were imported from Europe and sold in Port-au-Prince at a notions store owned by a one woman, Madame Mara. Her store was located in the vicinity of the Belair neighborhood, now reputed as a center of production of these flags. Was the proximity of her shop to Belair the catalyst for this phenomenon or did she locate her shop here because of the proliferation of artists in the area? While her descendants are not sure, that there was a symbiosis is evident. Further research on Madama Mara's store could help scholars determine dates and other details concerning the production of Vodou flags. The sequins and beads are now made of plastic, and the range of colors has multiplied, providing artists with a profusion of materials from which to choose.

Drapo Vodou were initially used for ceremonial purposes like those I saw in the candlelit chapel in Dezermite. I have also seen them used at various other occasions, assisting ceremonies at urban and rural *houmforts* (gathering spaces for Vodou adepts). The urban *houmforts* in particular can be very elaborate in terms of architecture and design, while the rural ones are simpler. The *houmforts*, like most churches, have a separate room where cult objects, including flags, are kept. Contrary to what I had witnessed as a child, drapo Vodou are used in a well-orchestrated ceremonial ritual. Its militaristic flavor has many researchers looking toward the presence of the French Army in Haiti and the pomp

and ceremony that accompanied their maneuvers and parades. Indeed, the French military standards are usually of square proportions, and their tasseled fringes and gold threads are very similar to that of drapos. The drapos are usually mounted on staffs and precede a *sevis* (ceremony). When a particular *Lwa* (Vodou god or spirit) is summoned, the flags, held by two *hounsis* (female initiates), enter the peristyle (assembly hall), where they make their way to the *poto mitan* (a sacred pole through which the *Lwa* descends and partakes in the ceremony). The *hounsis* salute the *poto mitan* by circling it and saluting it from four cardinal points. The event is quite choreographed, as they invite their assistants to salute the flags and then proceed to do so in hierarchic order. Then the *hounsis* are summoned to return to their abode, enacting a dramatic exit for the cult objects. There are many detailed studies on Vodou practices, one of the most compelling of which was *Voodoo in Haiti* written in 1959 by anthropologist and ethnologist Alfred Métraux.¹ His detailed observations attest to the complexity of this religion, which, though of African origins, is truly a testament to the trials, tribulations, and horrors suffered by enslaved Africans in Haiti. Vodou is a truly New World experience, in which elements from Africa, the Americas, and Europe have mingled, providing solace, vigor, and courage to the enslaved (or their descendants) and downtrodden.

The relationship of Vodou flags to the military should come as no surprise considering that the founding of Haiti as a nation state began with a Vodou ceremony that took place at the Bois Caïman in 1791. At this charged event, a pact was reached among the enslaved Africans to eradicate the infernal colonial machine. They launched a military onslaught against Napoleon's Army, which took some ten years to complete, resulting in the creation of the first black republic in the world. This saga is reenacted at every *sevis*, providing a moral lesson and tale of the courage and

perseverance of Haiti's ancestors, as well as serving as a cultural marker that defines Haitian concepts of freedom and dignity.

The symbols used by flagmakers follow the cosmologies used in most religions, including those from African nations once home to Haiti's forefathers. Unlike the Spaniards and the British, French slavers arrived late to the carving of the Americas, and hence they were forced to establish their colonial outposts in the Caribbean. Half of the island of Hispaniola became a very profitable enterprise based on sugar production, the driving force of which was the labor of over one million African slaves and Europeans' demand for this desired commodity. The Africans in Hispaniola came from every corner of the continent. This heterogeneity is reflected in Vodou, which incorporates in its pantheon spirits and deities from different groups, tribes, and nations in Africa. The power of these gods was used to propel the onslaught against the French Army, and their glyphs and graphs are incorporated in the production of the Vodou flags. The knowledge of these symbols is known as *veve*, through which sacred and esoteric essence are passed on from generation to generation of *houngan* (male Vodou priests). Haitian ethnologist Milo Rigaud compiled and published a lexicon of these sacred symbols in *Ve-ve: Diagrammes rituels du voodoo* (Veve: Ritual diagrams of vodou), now a much-consulted resource for Vodou flagmakers.²

The provenance of the *veve*, particularly its use in the creation of *drapos*, is a subject that has nagged researchers for some time. As mentioned above, there are certainly parallels to the French military standards, but some scholars have also pointed out that in certain parts of West Africa, such as Ghana and Benin, flags are also part of royal and military regalia. At the first International Festival of Vodun Arts and Cultures held in Ouidah, Benin, in 1993, the

profusion of richly decorated textiles in all shapes and sizes stemming from across West Africa was astounding. Dignitaries from Mali, Senegal, Nigeria, Togo, and Ghana, among other nations, as well as members of tribal royalty and their entourages, came to the gathering in full regalia, their presence signified by flags and brightly colored parasols, all richly decorated with emblems, symbols, and other signifiers. There was a profusion of embroideries, appliques, and sequined textiles, demonstrating West African skill and tradition, while also making evident their link with the Haitian *drapos*. However, the Haitian flags are nonetheless unique in comparison. Some of the work is of a particularly high aesthetic level because the artists are attempting to represent the beauty and misery of the *Lwas*. Hence, these are products of a deeply religious nature that the artist wishes to embellish in order to inspire awe in the viewer. For the Vodou flagmakers, their art is inspired and even directed by the *Lwa* being invoked. This close relationship with the world of the spirits is probably what gives the *drapos* their impact as artworks.

However, the flags also demonstrate other outside influences. For example, there is a relationship between the symbols used in the *drapos* and the sacred symbols found in Central Africa, as well as those in Brazilian Candomblé and Cuban Santería. Another parallel can be found with the symbology employed in the higher echelons of Freemasonry. In the early eighteenth century, Freemasons and their democratic ideology circulated widely in the intellectual milieu of Europe. Particularly mistrusted by the royalist establishments there, many fled and found safety in New World colonial outposts, including Hispaniola. Saint-Domingue was a hotbed for these free thinkers. Their legacy is more than evident in Haiti, and according to local lore there are more Mason lodges in Haiti today than there are *houmforts*. Scholar Katherine Smith expounds on Freemason symbols and *drapo Vodou* in the accompanying

text for this publication, “Freemasonry in Vodou Flags: Atlantic History and Haitian Art.”

The collection of drapo Vodou acquired by Ed and Ann Gessen is quite comprehensive. It provides the public with a serious overview of the production and evolution of this art form from the 1950s to the present. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, when the United States occupied the whole island and curios and other objets d’art were brought back as souvenirs by stationed military personnel, Haiti has attracted attention for the amazing diversity of its art. It continues to surprise the art world in the United States and elsewhere, as its artists have begun to show on an international scale. However, along with these art world successes Haiti has also had impact on popular culture in the United States. Tales of the living dead, or zombies, which have long existed on the island, have proliferated in literature and especially the entertainment industry.

The drapo Vodou remain one the most significant objects of art in Haiti, and with the scope of this collection we have the possibility of providing a nearly encyclopedic overview of this creative tradition for US audiences.

This exhibition has been organized into four main sections. *Sacred Diagrams* opens with a superlative range of work by nine artists who have created a name for themselves as flagmakers. Some of these artists have kept to the tradition of creating flags for ritual use, but most have developed their own vision of the genre. For example, the remarkable work of Myrlande Constant and Lherison Dubreus demonstrates the artists’ expressive approach to flag making and the exceptional quality of their workmanship. The second section, titled *Vintage Drapo Vodou*, highlights the array of subject matter and design conventions that

exist within the genre. These flags are more conventional and are usually unsigned as they were made for ritual use either by or under the direction of the houngan or the *mambo* (Vodou priestess). The third grouping is dedicated to one of the most important deities in the Vodou world, Lwa Ogun, the divinity associated with war, courage, valor, and resilience, who is invoked to fight injustice, abuse, and sickness. The flags that conjure this deity use images of the Catholic saint St. Jacques Majeur. Chromolithographs of the saint as a sword-wielding soldier on horseback are applied on the flag to create a powerful image that invokes the warlike quality of the Lwa. And, finally, the fourth part, at the entrance of the gallery, contains a series of flags that hang like banners, as they are often seen in temples.

Sacred Diagrams: Haitian Vodou Flags from the Gessen Collection aims to introduce or acquaint audiences with an exceptional art form unique to Haiti. The proximity of Haiti and the Caribbean to the United States prompts further exploration and discussion of the artistic legacy stemming from this island nation. *Sacred Diagrams* presents one aspect of the many creative practices Haiti offers to the world. I certainly hope that this overview of drapo Vodou through the Gessens’ collection provides the public with an interesting and comprehensive understanding of flag making, a significant and evolving tradition propelled by a group of Haiti’s most innovative artists.

¹ Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

² Milo Rigaud, *Ve-ve: Diagrammes rituel du voodoo* (New York: French and European Publications, ca. 1974).

FREEMASONRY IN VODOU FLAGS: ATLANTIC HISTORY AND HAITIAN ART

KATHERINE SMITH, Ph.D.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, flags have marshaled power wherever states, religions, or pirates crossed paths.¹ An Asafo flag from the Asante people speaks volumes about the historical role of military companies in West African politics. Saint George (Ogou Feray) and Saint Joseph (Kouzin Zaka), depicted in flags by Haitian artist Myrlande Constant, and earlier images of Saint Joseph and the Christ Child by an unknown artist, illuminate how African peoples in the Caribbean took the Catholic saints forced on them under colonial rule and reworked them into new, more relevant deities. But a careful look at the Haitian flags in the Gessen Collection also reveals an influence more overlooked in Atlantic history: Freemasonry.²

Stylized versions of the square and compass—the most recognizable symbol of Freemasonry—are common in *drapo* (Vodou flags). In the Gessen collection, the symbol appears in works by Clotaire Bazile, Mireille Delice, and other unknown artists. The G, said by Masons to represent geometry or sometimes the “Great Architect” (a non-denominational reference to God), can be seen in works by Bazile and unknown artists. The all-seeing eye, another symbol for God, can be found in works by Antoine Oleyant and Yves Telemak. The imagery of death, commonly associated with Gede spirits, is a reminder of mortality in Freemasonry. Works by Lherison Debreus, Oleyant, and

Georges Valris are replete with death imagery, including the black-and-white checkerboard pattern often found in Masonic lodges.

Freemasonry evolved into an international organization in the early eighteenth century, roughly the same era that plantation societies were becoming the new social order of the Caribbean. With the stated purpose of cultivating universal brotherhood, Freemasonry flourished in this new society, where the church and family were scant. By some accounts, Saint-Domingue (the French colony that became Haiti) was the most thoroughly Masonic society in the world.³ Within years of Haiti’s 1804 independence, lodges were re-formed or founded anew. By 1824 the Grand Orient of Haiti (an association of lodges) was established and by the 1840s lodges were widespread.⁴

While initiation into Freemasonry was largely restricted to elite Haitian men (including some powerful Vodou priests), it excited the popular imagination. For example, in 1893 a foreign observer complained, “Already the secrets of the Masons are completely well known to outsiders. Small children throw about Freemason words that they have caught from a proclamation, or newspaper, or some elder.”⁵ Still today, aspects of Freemasonry are undoubtedly public secrets that conceal just enough to entice curiosity.



Ernest Dominique (Haitian, birthdate unknown)
Untitled Pentak (Umabel), 2010s
 Ink, marker, watercolor, and graphite on file folder
 14 ¾ x 17 ¾ inches
 Collection of Edouard Duval-Carrié
 Photographer: Emily McVeigh

The works of high-ranking Mason Ernest Dominique demonstrate another important role played by Freemasonry in Haiti's religious landscape: fostering erudition. For some this includes esoteric arts like Rosicrucianism, theosophy, and kabbalism. Each of Dominique's *pentak* (pentacles) represents a different Solomonian angel. Dominique draws

on popular occultist literature to create his pentak and finds significance in his use of the square and compass to construct them. He goes on to use his creations for his own practice of healing magic, although he sees this as distinct from Vodou. His work is unique, yet, like Vodou, it marshals the power of Atlantic history toward powerful ends.

¹ Patrick Polk, "Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge," in *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 325–47.

² LeGrace Benson, "Freemasonry and Its Close Relations," in *Arts and Religions of Haiti* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randall Publishers, 2015), 40–47.

³ Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 67.

⁴ Gaétan Mentor, *Histoire de la Franc-maçonnerie en Haïti: Les fils noirs de la veuve* (Pétionville, Haiti: Bibliothèque Nationale d'Haïti, 2003), 15.

⁵ Louis Gentil Tippenhauer, *Die Insel Haiti* (Leipzig, Germany: F. A. Brockhaus, 1893), 490. My gratitude to Jutta Austin for translating this passage for me.

COLLECTING VODOU FLAGS: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CURATOR AND COLLECTOR

JOANNA ROBOTHAM (JR): You first discovered Haitian Vodou flags in 1998 at a garage sale in San Jose, California. Since this chance encounter, you have amassed one of the largest collections of these flags in the United States, if not the world. Why do Vodou flags intrigue and inspire you?

ED GESSEN (EG): I started collecting Haitian art around 1980, during my first visit to Haiti. As a typical tourist, I brought home several paintings, metal sculptures, and wood carvings. I also developed a love for the Haitian people and a deep appreciation for their art. When I saw my first Vodou flag, almost twenty years later, I was mesmerized by the unique image that was rendered entirely in beads and sequins. I was not sure exactly what it was, but during a visit to Los Angeles, a curator at the UCLA Fowler Museum, Patrick Polk, enlightened me about their function and history as ceremonial banners.

After I had learned more about them, I decided to visit Haiti again in search of more flags. Patrick had armed me with several copies of his book, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, to give to each of the artists he had interviewed. He had also coached me on how to find these artists in Port-au-Prince. I visited the ateliers of Silva Joseph, Edgar Jean-Louis, and Yves Telemak. I left each studio with lots of flags and little money.

Because I had visited the flagmakers and seen them make these incredible artworks, I had a rare exposure to their craft. The flags help tell the story of the Vodou religion through their illustrations of the Lwas, or gods. The syncretization of Catholic images with Vodou representations continues to fascinate me. Each flag, produced using some 20,000 beads and sequins, is like a painting in pixels.



(JR): How have your travels to Haiti and across the globe to view Haitian art collections informed your approach to collecting?

EG: During my years on the Board of Directors of the Haitian Art Society, I have met many fellow collectors, gallerists, museum professionals, writers, and scholars with a passion for Haitian art. I have also had the opportunity to visit most of the museums that have significant Haitian works in their collections. These include the Waterloo Center for the Arts, the UCLA Fowler Museum, the Figge Museum, the Ramapo College Rodman Collection, the Cargo Collection at the Birmingham Museum of Art, the Milwaukee Museum of Art, and many of the largest private collections in the US. My association with these sharing people and encounters with institutional collections has certainly broadened my own knowledge of Haitian art.

Most art collectors want to share their collections and knowledge with others, yet many don't get the opportunity to do so. Another common denominator is that no collector ever has enough wall space! In this sense, I am lucky to share my collection of Haitian flags with the audiences at the Tampa Museum of Art. It is the largest presentation of our flag collection at a museum to date.

(JR): Is there a particular flag, artist, or time period missing from your collection that you are hoping to acquire?

EG: I have been fortunate to acquire wonderful flags from all the flagmakers currently producing work today, as well

as those from the recent past. The flags are most often produced as decorative pieces for the art community. However, I am interested to find the older, unsigned, sequined banners that were produced in the 1940s to the 1980s as sacred ceremonial objects. These flags are often worn and damaged from having been used in actual ceremonies. They are the forerunners of the secular sequin arts of today.

(JR): How has working with guest curator and artist Edouard Duval-Carrie on the exhibition *Sacred Diagrams: Haitian Vodou Flags from the Gessen Collection* further informed your knowledge and appreciation for Haitian art and Vodou flags?

EG: Edouard is a visionary artist with deep roots in Haiti, its people, and Vodou culture. His creativity emerges from this core and his global viewpoint brings exciting new directions to his art. My wife Ann and I recently visited Edouard's studio, where we were able to see the types of objects he surrounds himself with and what inspires him. I was not surprised to find various forms of Haitian art, but I was quite taken aback by the number of African wood carvings, metal works, and textiles in his collection. He also has Tibetan thangka paintings, Japanese tansu furniture, Indian objects, and a very impressive library. His own artworks are in various stages of completion. Edouard always experiments with new media and techniques to expand his boundaries. I am grateful to have had the chance to work with him on this project.



DRAPO VODOU: NINE ARTISTS

The nine artists highlighted in *Sacred Diagrams: Haitian Vodou Flags from the Gessen Collection* represent three generations of flagmakers. Clotaire Bazile, Silva Joseph, and Edgar Jean-Louis exemplify the traditional format and design of the flagmakers working in the Bel-Air neighborhood of Port-au-Prince. Their craftsmanship elevated the drapo Vodou as an art form and influenced new generations of flagmakers. Younger artists such as Myrlande Constant, Mireille Delice, and Lherison Debreus continue to develop their own style and interpretations of Vodou flags. Viewed together, the nine artists demonstrate the extraordinary beauty, electric color, and exquisite craftsmanship of drapo Vodou.

Unless otherwise noted, all works from the Collection of Ed and Ann Gessen.



Clotaire Bazile (Haitian, b. 1950)
Dambala Wedo Tokan, 1983
Sequins and beads on cloth
30 x 37 inches



Clotaire Bazile (Haitian, b. 1950)
Diobolo Bossou, 1970s
Sequins and beads on cloth
36 x 32 inches



Myrlande Constant (Haitian, b. 1968)
Ogou Ferraille, 2004
 Sequins and bugle beads on cloth
 42 x 48 inches



Myrlande Constant (Haitian, b. 1968)
Papa Zack/St. Joseph, 1990s
 Beads on cloth
 37 x 24 inches
 Tampa Museum of Art, Gift of Kay Culbreath & J. Roderick Heller
 in memory of Dr. William Hodges of Haiti, 2000.009



Lherison Debreus (Haitian, b. 1971)
Jan Zonbi, 2003
 Sequins and beads on board
 23 x 18 inches



Lherison Debreus (Haitian, b. 1971)
Excite Lakwa, 2014
 Sequins and beads on board
 35 x 25 inches



Mireille Delice (Haitian, b. 1965)
Erzulie, 2001
 16 x 16 inches
 Sequins and bugle beads on cloth



Mireille Delice (Haitian, b. 1965)
Reine Soleil, c. 2002
 Sequins and beads on cloth
 41 x 40 inches



Silva Joseph (Haitian, 1930-2011)
Grand Bois, 1992
 Sequins and beads on cloth
 30 x 30 inches



Silva Joseph (Haitian, 1930-2011)
Erzulie Danthor, 1999
 Sequins and beads on cloth
 33 x 31 inches



Edgar Jean-Louis (Haitian, 1921-2010)
St. Rose Erzulie, 1980s
 Sequins and beads on cloth with chromolithograph
 30 x 30 inches



Edgar Jean-Louis (Haitian, 1921-2010)
Bossou, 1980s
 Sequins and beads on cloth
 29 x 29 inches



Antoine Oleyant (Haitian, 1955-1992)
Double Bossou and Damballah, 1985
 Sequins and beads on cloth
 38 x 32 inches



Antoine Oleyant (Haitian, 1955-1992)
Baron Chefoles, 1980s
 Sequins and beads on cloth
 41 x 33 inches



Yves Telemak (Haitian, b. 1955)
Ceremonie Bossou, 2000
 Sequins and beads on cloth
 40 x 33 inches



Yves Telemak (Haitian, b. 1955)
Dambalah Wouedo, 1998
 Sequins and beads on cloth
 32 x 33 inches



Georges Valris (Haitian, b. 1953)
Ghede, early 1990s
 Sequins and beads on cloth
 30 x 30 inches



Georges Valris (Haitian, b. 1953)
Banda (Dancing Ghede), 2000
 Sequins and beads on cloth
 41 x 35 inches

ST. JACQUES MAJEUR

Many drapo Vodou feature various artistic interpretations of Catholic saint St. Jacques Majeur. As demonstrated by the flags in the Gessen Collection, Some artists incorporate a chromolithograph, a colorful paper image, of St. Jacques Majeur into the flag. Other flag makers use intricate beadwork to create the profile of the saint. St. Jacques Majeur is associated with Ogun, the Vodou lwa (or deity) of war, strength, and courage. He is traditionally depicted as sword-wielding soldier on horseback.



Top left: Artist Unknown, *St. Jacques Majeur*, 1960s. Sequins, beads, and chromolithograph on cloth. 34 x 35 inches.

Top right: Artist Unknown, *St. Jacques Majeur*, 1960-70s. Sequins and beads on cloth. 30 x 26 inches.

Bottom: Installation view, detail of *St. Jacques Majeur* section.



Artist Unknown
St. Jacques Majeur, 1960-70s
Sequins and beads on cloth
32 x 28 inches



Artist Unknown
St. Jacques Majeur, 1950-1970
Sequins and beads on cloth
30 x 30 inches

VINTAGE DRAPO VODOU

Extant drapo Vodou date to the 1930s and incorporated metal sequins and glass beads imported from Europe. The drapo Vodou in the Gessen Collection range in date from the 1940s to the 1990s, and were created with plastic beads and sequins. These flags were likely used in Vodou ceremonies and used in pairs or presented in groups of three. This grouping represents the ritualistic traditions of Vodou and the imagery demonstrates the array of Lwas, or gods, represented in the Vodou pantheon, which is vast.



Artist Unknown
Dambalah, 1950
Sequins and beads on cloth
25 x 29 inches



Artist Unknown
Erzulie Freda, 1960s
Sequins and beads on cloth
29 x 29 inches



Artist Unknown
Agowe, 1980s
Sequins and beads on cloth
38 x 29 inches



Installation view, detail of *Vintage Drapo Vodou* section.

DRAPO VODOU: NINE ARTISTS BIOGRAPHIES

CLOTAIRE BAZILE

Haitian, b. 1950

Clotaire Bazile's background differs from many of the drapo Vodou artists. He grew up in the Catholic religion but became a hougan or Vodou priest at the age of 18. Soon after, in 1972, Bazile made his first Vodou flag. *Dambala Wedo Tokan* and *Diobolo Bossou* demonstrate the artist's signature style. A traditionalist, Bazile's drapo Vodou feature a colorful geometric border with an image of a Lwa (deity) at the center of the flag.

MYRLANDE CONSTANT

Haitian, b. 1968

Born in Port-au-Prince in 1968, Myrlande Constant is one of today's foremost artists of drapo Vodou. Trained as a dressmaker, Constant worked in a factory sewing wedding dresses and began making flags in the 1990s. She is known for her elaborate beaded compositions and her work reflects a more painterly approach to flag making. Furthermore, Constant's flags highlight a feminist perspective in her advocacy of Haitian women. Although she references traditional Vodou imagery and deities, her drapo Vodou are regarded as works of art, rather than as sacred objects.

LHERISON DEBREUS

Haitian, b. 1971

Lherison Debreus (also spelled Debrise) was born in 1971 in Cap Haitien on the north coast, but he spent his childhood in Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince. He learned about the sacred arts of Vodou from Tibout, a Vodou priest and flagmaker. After Tibout died, Debreus continued to make flags in the tradition of his mentor. His drapo Vodou are admired for their ornate and sculptural surfaces, which are a departure from the traditional format. He also creates objects used in rites of the secret society, called Bizongo, which stems from the Congo region of central Africa.

MIREILLE DELICE

Haitian, b. 1965

Born in 1965 in the coastal city of Léogâne, Mireille Delice learned the art of flag making from her friend Myrlande Constant. Like Constant, Delice worked in a wedding dress factory in Port-au-Prince. She started creating flags after dreaming about the Vodou Lwa (or spirit) Erzulie. Her first drapo Vodou featured a heart—the imagery associated with Erzulie. Delice established her own atelier and continues to make flags inspired by both Vodou and everyday life in Haiti.

EDGAR JEAN-LOUIS

Haitian, 1921–2010

Edgar Jean-Louis learned the art of drapo Vodou from Silva Joseph. A respected artist and hougan, or local priest, Jean-Louis' craftsmanship reflects the artistry and expertise of the Bel-Air flagmakers. He became known for the exceptional detail in his work. An influential Bel-Air artist, Jean-Louis mentored new generations of flagmakers until his death in 2010.

SILVA JOSEPH

Haitian, 1930–2011

Silva Joseph remains one of the most respected flagmakers trained in the Bel-Air tradition. The quality of his work brought attention to the genre within Haiti and abroad. Born in 1930 in Léogâne, Joseph was both a hougan (priest) and maker of drapo Vodou. He shared his temple and atelier with Edgar Jean-Louis. Joseph's work represents the standard of drapo Vodou. As seen in the flags *Grand Bois* and *Erzulie Danthor*, a decorative sequined border frames the central image of a Vodou Lwa, or deity. Joseph died at the age of 81 in Port-au-Prince.

ANTOINE OLEYANT

Haitian, 1955–1992

Antoine Oleyant was born in the mountain village of Plaisance du Sud in Haiti. As a child, he worked on the family farm and at the age of 16, he moved to Port-au-Prince and trained with wood and metal sculptors. In the early 1980s, Oleyant began making drapo Vodou and was influential in transforming the genre from craft to high art. Oleyant died unexpectedly at the age of 37 but continues to be celebrated as a master artist of drapo Vodou.

YVES TELEMAK

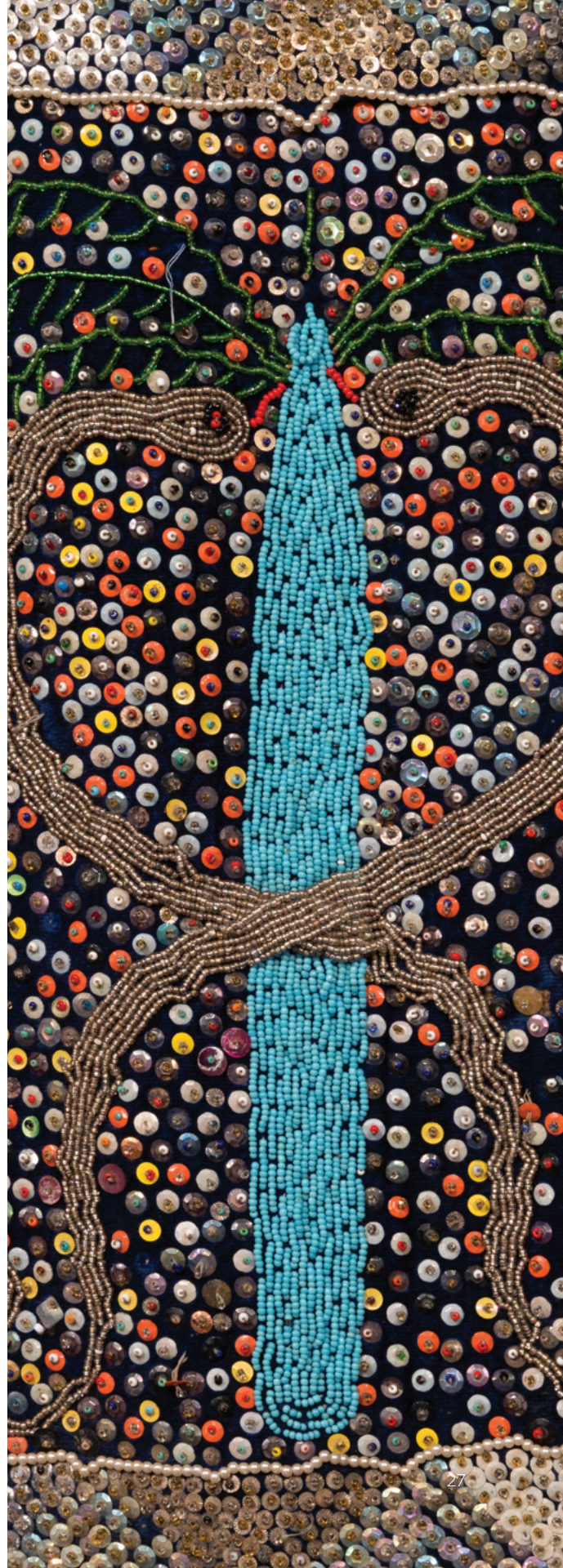
Haitian, b. 1955

Yves Telemak learned about Vodou sacred art from his father André Telemak, a respected hougan (priest). Telemak learned the art of drapo Vodou in the atelier of revered Bel-Air flagmaker Joseph Fortine. However, Telemak's compositions differ from the older generations of flagmakers and he is known for creating elaborate borders comprised of colorful imagery. Similar to Myrlande Constant and Mireille Delice, Telemak's drapo Vodou are collected as works of art, rather than viewed as ritual objects.

GEORGES VALRIS

Haitian, b. 1953

Born in Cavaillon, Haiti, Georges Valris' background differs from the traditional drapo Vodou artists. Many flagmakers, such as Edgar Jean-Louis and Silva Joseph, are both hougan (priests) and artists, but Valris is not a practitioner of Vodou. Valris initially made baskets and later was introduced to the art of drapo Vodou by a friend. Although he references Vodou deities in his work, Valris' flags reflect his commitment to Catholicism with his depictions of Christian imagery.



CONTRIBUTORS

EDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ is a contemporary artist, scholar, and curator based in Miami, Florida. Born and raised in Haiti, Duval-Carrié creates artworks and organizes exhibitions that speak to the complexities of the Caribbean and its diaspora. His work has been exhibited in major museums and festivals around the globe including the Pérez Art Museum, Miami; Studio Museum in Harlem; Figge Art Museum; and the 54th Venice Biennale. In 2019, Duval-Carrié collaborated with the Tampa Museum of Art and was the guest curator for *Sacred Diagrams: Haitian Vodou Flags from the Gessen Collection*, one of three shows featured in the exhibition series *Ordinary/Extraordinary: Assemblage in Three Acts*.

KATHERINE SMITH, Ph.D., is a Lecturer in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at the University of California, Los Angeles and a Visiting Researcher in the UCLA International Institute. She has held fellowships at Brown University and New York University, and publishes regularly in academic journals and edited volumes. Dr. Smith has played a curatorial role in two exhibitions: *Reframing Haiti: Art, History, and Performativity* at Brown University (2011) and *In Extremis: Life and Death in 21st Century Haitian Art* (2012). She is the lead curator for the forthcoming retrospective on Haitian textile artist Myrlande Constant. Dr. Smith's current field-based research focuses on Freemasonry in the Caribbean.

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