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Haitian Art Exhibition Traces Its Global Influence

Brenda C. Siler - December 16, 2024



“Guede Diable 2 Cornes” (no date) was created by contemporary artist Myrlande Constant. She describes her textile work as “painting with beads.” She depicts Guede, the black-colored spirit, representing death. (Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Gift of Beverly and John Fox Sullivan)

Haiti is the first free Black republic dating back to the 1900s. “Spirit & Strength: Modern Art from Haiti” is the first chance the public has to see 21 works by Haitian artists recently given to the National Gallery of Art (NGA). With works hung throughout three smaller galleries, this exhibition is on view in the NGA-East Building until March 9.

The exhibition was curated by Kanitra Fletcher, associate curator of African American and Afro-Diasporic art, with Justin Brown, the Samuel H. Kress predoctoral fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts.

“In the 20th century, leading Haitian painters gained international recognition. They influenced generations of African American artists, from Lois Mailou Jones to Betye Saar,” according to the NGA website.

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In addition to Jones and Saar, works from other well-known American artists included in this exhibition are by Aaron Douglas and Jacob Lawrence.

The various styles of Haitian art have similar qualities. Most prominent is the use of vibrant colors in depicting people, their clothes, landscapes, and animals. Faith is very important and unseen but believable spirits are shown in several ways. Some Haitian artists in “Spirit and Strength” are Myrlande Constant, Philomé Obin, Jasmin Joseph, and Rigaud Benoit.

Constant is known for working with textiles, beads and other pieces that give the work a multi-dimensional feel. Obin was one of the founders of the Cap-Haïtien school, a painting style named for the city where it emerged. Joseph was known for such striking paintings of animals, often engaged in human activities. Benoit’s painting “Annunciation” shows the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, who have brown skin and curly black hair. This artist painted them as Haitians.

“Haitian modern art is rich and complex. Artists depict stories from everyday life, political history, Biblical tales, and symbolism from Vodou. (Haitian Vodou is a religion developed from the blending of multiple African tribal traditions among enslaved people in Haiti,” captured from a description of “Spirit and Strength.” “Over time, its practitioners adapted some Roman Catholic traditions and created new ones specific to the Caribbean. Among the core practices of Vodou are healing, ancestral remembrance, and serving the spirits.”

“Spirit & Strength: Modern Art from Haiti” is a free exhibition open seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., except Dec. 25 and Jan. 1.

The exhibition’s website and a schedule of education tours are at nga.gov.