



art museum of the americas  
organization of american states

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May 11, 2009

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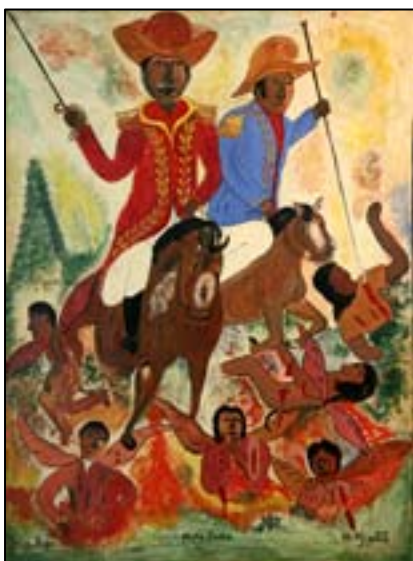
***Mystical Imagination:***  
***The Art of Haitian Master Hector Hyppolite***

**WHAT:** *"Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master Hector Hyppolite,"* a new exhibition at the Art Museum of the Americas, Organization of American States

**WHEN:** May 12 through July 5, 2009

**WHERE:** Art Museum of the Americas, 201 18<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006

**OPENING RECEPTION: Monday, May 18 at 6pm**



**Papa Zaca and Papa Ogoun**, oil on Board, From the collection of Jonathan Demme.

*"Mystical Imagination"* marks the sole exhibition in Washington of works by Haitian master Hector Hyppolite during Haiti's Year of Hyppolite. Comprised of more than fifty works from public and private collections, the exhibition reflects Hyppolite's remarkably prolific period, from 1945 until his death in 1948.

Born in 1894 in Haiti (whether in St.-Marc or Port-au-Prince has been the subject of debate), Hector Hyppolite worked cutting sugarcane, and later claimed to have travelled to Africa by boarding a freighter ship and traveled around the continent for five years. He painted houses for a living as early as 1920. He arrived on the art scene in 1945 when he joined the Centre d'Art, the Port-au-Prince art gallery and school founded by DeWitt Peters, an American school teacher who arrived in Haiti in 1940 and was struck by the work of several artists who eventually came to exemplify the country's modern art. In 1943, Peters noticed intricately designed flowers and red and green tropical birds decorating the two front doors of a bar along the roadway between Port-au-Prince and St.-Marc. A year later, Peters tracked down the artist, inviting Hyppolite to move into the Centre and paint. Hyppolite chose instead to work in his own hut near the

waterfront, and began to paint tirelessly.

Indeed this was just a beginning of the highly prolific and unfortunately brief period (3 years) of artistic production that Hyppolite embarked on until his death in 1948 of an apparent heart attack, during which he produced an estimated 200-300 paintings. His work captured the eyes of Cuban artist Wifredo Lam and French Surrealist poet André Breton, who purchased five of his paintings, after which Hyppolite's work was featured in the 1947 UNESCO international exhibition in Paris. The inclusion of Hyppolite as well as other contemporaries in the UNESCO exhibits of 1946 and 1947 brought about a global interest in modern Haitian art. Hyppolite embraced a free-form approach for which subject matter held a far greater significance than linear precision.

In the essay *Images of Loas, Portraits of Man*, former Musée d'Art Haitien du College Saint Pierre director Gerald Alexis notes that while *vévé* (a religious symbol for a Vodun "loa" or spirit) imagery "already existed as a linear and abstract art form prior to Hyppolite's arrival on Haiti's art scene," Hyppolite's forms were "dominated by the idea itself wrapped in sensual and perceptible forms (...) establishing an iconography of the *loas*."

Hyppolite depicted images of everyday life, national history and politics, Haitian Vodun iconography, and classical Christian imagery. He continued to work until his death, simultaneously working as a shipbuilder to provide himself with other means of survival and thus the freedom to strive for greater explorations through his painting.

The exhibition was curated by Kent Shankle of the Waterloo Center for the Arts (Iowa) who is also co-President of the Haitian Art Society. *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master Hector Hyppolite* presents the artist's work as represented by a wide range of paintings from public and private collections in Haiti and the United States such as the Musee d'Art Haitien du College Saint Pierre in Port-au-Prince, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, and five works from the private collection of film director Jonathan Demme, a prominent collector of Haitian art. Many of the lenders are also members of the Haitian Art Society.

According to Shankle, "many of Hyppolite's paintings depict theatre, women, birds, flowers, picturesque scenery...but even these works, which might on a superficial viewing appear to be simple or purely secular, are imbued with rich layers of spiritual overtones and undertones, reflective of the deep and pervasive nature of Vodun in the psyche of Hyppolite, and within the context of the larger Haitian culture".

For more information and images in high-resolution, contact **Greg Svitil at (202) 458-6016** or [gsvitil@oas.org](mailto:gsvitil@oas.org), or visit us on the web at [www.museum.oas.org](http://www.museum.oas.org).

This exhibition will be on view at the Art Museum of the Americas (201 18<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W.) from **May 12 through July 5, 2009**. Museum hours are Tuesday through Sunday, 10 am-5 pm (closed Mondays and Federal holidays).

*Mystical Imagination* is presented in collaboration with the Haitian Art Society, the Permanent Mission of Haiti to the Organization of American States, and the Waterloo Center for the Arts of Iowa.



**General Baubou and the Mambo**  
Oil on paperboard mounted on wood, by 1948  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest, 1981  
Photographer: Lee Stalworth



**Sail on the Sea**, oil on Board, circa 1947,  
Collection of Musee d'Art Haitien du College Saint Pierre