SACRED FORMS: RITUAL, REPRESENTATION, AND THE BODY IN HAITIAN PAINTING

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...[In sacred works, where the acts will not, in themselves, result in anything, but may be rewarded if they please the divinity to whom they are addressed—where, therefore, there can be said to be no direct material purpose—the form is the total statement; and its distinctive quality is that reverent dedication which man brings only to divinity.

Maya Deren, Divine Horsemen

In her exploration of the work of Haitian flagmaker and Vodou priest Clotaire Bazile, Anna Wexler describes the “mastery of ritual detail” that characterizes his work as both *ounjan* and artist as a skill that allows him to translate the “intense awareness of [his sacred work’s] power to heal and to destroy into tangible forms.”¹ This “mastery of ritual detail” encapsulates the aesthetic dimension of all sacred work in Vodou and guides the recreation of those sacred forms which, in Deren’s words, encompass the “distinctive quality” of “reverent dedication which man brings only to divinity.”² In Vodou, mastery of the ritual forms is essential to the summoning of the spirits—known as *lwa* or *mystères*—into the presence of believers (or *serviteurs*), and this mastery requires strict attention to the aesthetics of worship and representation. As Wexler explains, “there is an edge to acts of beauty that not only represent but activate the transforming energy of the spirits.”³

Early historians of Haitian art found in the aesthetic foundations of Vodou a key to understanding the development of a painting tradition closely linked to religious practice. LeGrace Benson, writing about
Wilson Bigaud underscores the importance of “Haitian history, true and invented, and Haitian religion” as inspiration for the art created by the artists of his generation, born of “pride in the establishment of a sustained independent Black country by means of a revolution assisted by the [lwa]” and despair that the promises made to the lwa were still unkept. Selden Rodman, in The Miracle of Haitian Art, argued that the artists of the first generation of the Centre d’Art in Port-au-Prince—many of them Vodou priests or practitioners—not only drew inspiration from religious beliefs and practices, thematically as well as formally, but built the aesthetic bases of their visual language on the forms and objects familiar to them from ritual practice. Chief among these were the vèvè or ritual drawings sketched on the temple ground with cornmeal, ash, powdered eggshells, or coffee grounds as a means to summon the lwa (spirits) to join believers during ceremonies. Vèvè, as Patricia Mohammed has argued, “consecrate the ground area they cover for the loa they represent,” turning the space of ritual into a canvas for the reproduction of intricate and ephemeral ritual designs that will be erased by dancers’ feet during ceremonies. The masterful recreation of these ritual designs, critics have argued, served as an introduction to artistic creativity for many Haitian painters and constitutes “the visual progenitor of Haiti’s renaissance.”

Inspiration was also drawn from two other categories of religious art available to early Haitian painters, that of the Catholic chromolithographs and church frescoes depicting incidents in the lives of the saints, and the “richly ornamented” sequined ceremonial flags—such as those produced by Clotaire Bazile—which serve as “points of entry” for the lwa during ceremonies. The chromolithographs offered a visual example of “an institutionalized religion’s understanding…and…conceptual meditation of the sacred.” The same could be argued for the flags, simultaneously objects of great beauty and potentially of great power, which, during ceremonies, “are unfurled and danced about…to signal the spirits represented by the vèvè…or the images of corresponding Catholic saints sewn on them” to join the ritual. “Their reflective brilliance,” Wexler argues, “is said to attract the spirits into the human gathering, mediating between two worlds.”

The ritual function of the vèvè and the drapo—central elements in Vodou’s most important sacred forms—which also include food offerings, dance, music, and animal sacrifice—is not abstraction, but rather the fulfillment of a ritualistic embodiment that invites the spirits to enter the realm of the living through physical manifestations of their presence, chief among them the phenomenon of possession. The achievement of beauty through ritual, which is vital to the success of the appeal to the spirits in Vodou, hinges on the “mastery of ritual detail” that Wexler observed in Bazile’s work and which is realized primarily through manifestations of the lwa through the bodies of the serviteurs or initiated. The aim is to invite the spirits—les invisibles—to embody themselves in a chosen serviteur who in turn will give the spirit a voice. Success is predicated on mastering the forms, on reaching the high level of aesthetic practice that will satisfy the requirements of the lwa.

This close relationship between the spirits and the living—established through the body as a vehicle for sacred work in Vodou—is one of the most significant themes of Haitian art, particularly in the first and second generations of the Centre d’Art. Early Haitian painters, I would argue here, turned the centrality of sacred work in Vodou practice into one of the guiding principles (and subject matters) of a burgeoning artistic tradition. This close link between ritual practice, faith, and art—as we will see below through various examples of salient works by noted Haitian painters—has been repeatedly articulated through representations of bodies engaged in the masterful performance of sacred work, of ritual intended to breach the divide between living beings and the word of the lwa. The paintings examined below reveal how the “mastery of ritual detail” has been as central to the successful embodiment of the spirits in Vodou practice as it has been to the articulation through art of the vital transformations that have made Vodou such a dynamic and aesthetic-centered religious practice.

Toussaint Auguste’s Papa Zaca en Possession (Possessed by Papa Zaca, 1953, figure 5.1) depicts most vividly the breach of the divide between the living and the lwa that is the one common goal of all sacred work in Vodou. Auguste (1925–), a painter from Leogane, a village southwest of Port-au-Prince, just north of Jacmel, was one of the early painters working at the Centre d’Art in Port-au-Prince. Acknowledged as one of the first generation masters of Haitian painting, Auguste’s choice of religious subjects articulates the complexities of religious life in Haiti, where Vodou and Christian practices seem often to coexist in somewhat congenial simultaneity. Known for sensitive depictions of Vodou ritual in his paintings, Auguste has also portrayed Protestant rituals (see his Baptism, 1949), which he knew well as a lay reader for the Episcopal Diocese in the mid-1940s, and was one of the muralists who participated in the decoration of the Episcopal Cathedral of Sainte Trinité in Port-au-Prince, which
includes his renderings of the Flight into Egypt and The Temptation of Adam and Eve.

In Papa Zaka en Possession, however, Auguste has turned to the lwa most closely connected to the Haitian peasantry (another prominent subject in his work) to depict Vodou’s most significant embodiment ritual within the context of Haiti’s most urgent historical crisis (the severe deforestation that has rapidly destroyed the land’s productivity in the small island-nation). Papa Zaka, also known as Azaca or Kouzen (Cousin) Zaka, is the Vodou lwa of agriculture, the protector of the Haitian land. A peasant figure traced to Amerindian culture, Papa Zaca is recognized by his blue denim jacket and the makout or sissal market sack he habitually carries. Those possessed by Papa Zaka usually don his characteristic peasant straw hat and go through the motions of sowing seed. When he appears in a ceremony, he is typically offered peasant fare—boiled maize, afihan (stuffed pig intestines), and glasses of clairin (peasant-distilled white rum). His véné (see figure 5.1) incorporates the elements of his agricultural role—his makout with its decorative tassels, the scythe and machete as instruments for clearing and sowing the land, the pipe that points to his enjoyment of simple pleasures, the grid-like patterns on the makout that recall seeded fields, and the bottle of clairin.

Auguste’s painting articulates with great simplicity and acute clarity the reciprocity of the relationship between serviteur and lwa that marks the phenomenon of possession—the embodiment of a lwa in the body of a serviteur that is the cornerstone of Vodou as a belief system. During possession, the possessed—the “horse”—gives his or her voice to the spirit, articulating “the reciprocal abiding of human and god” and making communication between the world of the spirits and that of humans possible. The lwa, as Joan Dayan has argued, “cannot appear in epiphany, cannot be made manifest on earth without the person who becomes the temporary receptacle or mount.” The horse, therefore, must surrender his or her body temporarily to the needs of the lwa, allowing, through the process, the guiding wisdom and divine power (or ashe) to flow from the realm of the spirits into that of their serviteurs. In Papa Zaka en Possession, Auguste captures this ritualized reciprocity through the mirror-like elements that articulate the link between the two figures—the lwa and the woman he has possessed.

The importance of the “embodiment” of the horse by the lwa is underscored in Papa Zaka en Possession by the prominence given to the possessed woman, who occupies the geometric center of the canvas. Dressed in the garb of the lwa—unadorned denim dress, makout, and straw hat—she is represented following the crise de lwa, the moment when the spirit occupied her head, just as she has completed the embodiment process and is ready to speak for the lwa. The reciprocity, evident in their mirroring positions, is underscored by the matching jugs, as Papa Zaca readies to pour the contents of his into hers. The exchange could be of seeds, water, the clairin or local rum favored by the lwa, or of the ashe or “power in the state of pure energy,” as Miguel Barnet has defined it (82). The prominence of the makout recalls the lwa’s association with abundance and magic, attributes traditionally linked to the tassel decorations on Papa Zaka’s straw bag.

Auguste contextualizes his representation of possession, not by placing his reciprocal figures within the ceremonial space of the ounfo or temple, but by using the backdrop of the eroded and deforested Haitian landscape as the means of emphasizing the need for Papa Zaca’s intervention to help the Haitian land recover its fertility. The leafless and truncated trees in the foreground, the stump of a tree on the lower left corner, and the denuded and deforested hills in the

Figure 5.1 Auguste, Toussaint. Papa Zaca en Possession (1953). Oil on masonite. 11¾ × 14¾ inches.
background, all point to Haiti's devastating ecological dilemma. In Haiti, persistent and prolonged deforestation dating back to the clearing of the land for sugar cultivation in the early eighteenth century, and continuing into the present because of the lack of ready access to cooking fuel in the countryside, has left the island severely deforested. With its forest coverage reduced to less than one percent of the national territory, Haiti has been plagued by the devastating consequences of its severe environmental crisis—the catastrophic erosion that has washed away the fertile topsoil into the sea, frequent deadly mudslides, severe decreases in rainfall, and growing desertification in areas of the country that once produced several yearly crops. It is a situation exacerbated by the devastating loss of the sustaining forest coverage reduced to less than one percent of the land for sugar cultivation in the early eighteenth century, of Haiti. The ecological context underscores the "total integrity of cultural form" that characterizes Vodou as religious practice.

Possession, as illustrated by Auguste, has the ultimate goal of practical intervention in solving Haiti's environmental dilemma. The painting underscores that the ultimate goal of successful sacred forms rests in the "lwa's" successful intervention in the resolution of the problems plaguing the mortals who serve them.

The placement of the possessed at the center of his painting also allows Auguste to use the space she occupies as a liminal space between the two realms—that of the spirits, occupied by the "lwa, represented here in human form, and that of the serviteur, toward which, in her state of possession, she has temporarily turned her back. His composition, which shows a fairly symmetrical allocation of space to the three realms depicted, balances the space occupied by the "lwa on the left with the space to the right occupied by four elements: a truncated, branchless tree which reminds us of the barrenness and deforestation Papa Zaca is called upon to resolve; the cemetery cross usually found in the vèvè for Bawon (Baron) Samdi (the lwa who rules over death and the cemetery and who belongs to the family of spirits known as Ghédé); a lamb, Christian symbol of sacrifice, standing here for the animal sacrifices often offered to the lwa as a gesture of placation or thanks; and a red door on a white hut, combining the colors sacred to Papa Legba, keeper of the gates that divide the spirit background...
on the upper left quarter of the canvas, which connects the dance to the Ghédé. Bawon Samdi, his wife Maman Brigitte, and the Ghédé spirits are traditionally served with the colors featured here (black, white, and purple) and are symbolized by the image of the cross on a coffin or tomb that we also saw in *Papa Zaka en Possession*. The allusion to the Bawon and the Ghédé transforms what could have been read as a pleasant peasant dance into a ceremonial offering to the *lwa* and his spirit family.

Domond’s composition privileges the three pairs of dancers, who occupy the foreground of the painting, forming a horizontal band that leads the eye from left to right. The painter, however, uses the diagonal lines formed by the low wall that fences the enclosed dancing space to point to the upper left corner occupied by the *drapo*, thereby accentuating the space occupied by the ceremonial flag. Its presence is also signaled by the arm of the drummer who occupies the upper center of the painting. As it extends upward, it creates a horizontal line that further delineates the space occupied by the flag. Domond, however, seems interested in broadening, rather than circumscribing, the presence of the *lwa* in his dance scene, an aim he accomplishes through his use of purple, the color associated with Ghédé. Shades of purple, from that of the *drapo* itself to those of the wall against which it stands and the clothing of dancers and musicians, suggests the presence of Ghédé throughout the painting. The presence of the *lwa*, one could conclude, permeates the dance scene, enveloping the bodies whose ceremonial dancing invokes his company.

In *Dance Scene*, Domond is working with a limited palette that he uses to advantage to create a scene of harmony and synchrony that suggests the modulations of the dance and the importance of the synergy between musicians and dancers to sustain the presence of the *lwa* among them. Working primarily with dark blue, yellow, and ochre (in addition to the *lwa*’s characteristic purple, white, and black), the palette integrates his dancers and musicians into one single purpose—that of uniting visually the cadences of music and movement to sustain the presence of the *lwa*. We see this, for example, in his use of yellow in the clothing of the drummer that occupies the apex of the angle formed by the low wall. The color, repeated in the dresses of two of the dancing women (the ones that frame the dancing couples to the left and right of the small group), creates a triangle that accentuates the diagonal lines formed by the low wall. The yellow is balanced at the top of the triangle by the purple of the *drapo*, a balancing that is rearticulated at the lower right corner of the painting by the clothing worn by one of the musicians. The two colors underscore the triangle-within-a-square composition that opens the painting to the space occupied by the viewer, suggesting other dancers outside that space, among whom the viewer could locate him or herself.

Maya Deren, in her seminal work on Vodou, found that “Haitian dancing was not, in itself, a dance-form, but part of a larger form, the mythological ritual.” Ritual dance, she argued, discards individual virtuosity and privileges “the simple, anonymous movements” of the collective body. These “simple, anonymous” movements are the ones recreated by Domond in *Dance Scene*: its three couples move in unison, eyes fixed on their partners, the position of their feet suggesting ritual movement in response to an uncomplicated pattern. The dance suggests “the gentle rolling of the hips seen in many Caribbean dances of Kongo provenance.” None of the dancers seems interested in a virtuoso display of individual dancing skills, but in the measured, prescribes steps of the traditional dance. The subdued eroticism of the dance—the dancing in couples, the staring into the partners’ eyes, the coordinated movements of the dancers—link the dance represented in the painting to Ghédé, since ordinarily ritual
choreography is limited to a general movement of the dancers counterclockwise around the poto mitan or temple center post. The most salient dances involving couples are linked to the performance of the "semicomic and sexually provoking rhythms of banda"23 dedicated to Ghédé and associated either with gyrating hips and sexual gestures or by rhythmic, sensual dancing by couples that recalls the "intimate, suggestive subtlety" of Ghédé’s M’sieur Entretoute avatar.24 While Ghédé can be brazenly obscene, M’sieur Entretoute is slyly erotic and wittily sensual. Ghédé’s dances, although most commonly associated with the affirmation of the erotic principle—"the inevitable and eternal erotic in men"25—are often, according to Katherine Dunham, performed at funerals "in keeping with the African philosophy which closely associates procreation with death."26

In her study of Katherine Dunham’s approach to ritual dance in Haiti, Joyce Aschenbrenner observes that, in Haiti, “the distinction between sacred and secular [dance is] one of function rather than form.”27 This is a link not always understood by observers. Eighteenth-century writer Louis Méric Moreau de St. Méry, writing with little understanding of the religious foundation of Vodou in his seminal work on Haiti, could not distinguish what he called the “dance vaudoux” from the ritual for which it opened a path. What escaped him was the vital link between the drums, songs, and dance: “The ritual orientation of the initiates, the rhythm of the drums, the songs of the ounsi, work together to create a kinesthetic medium for the lwa to manifest themselves in dance.”28 I would argue that, for a painter such as Domond, vitally interested in the recreation of sacred forms in his painting, establishing this distinction between secular and sacred dance in Dance Scene was of primary importance. Hence the prominent position accorded to Ghédé’s drapo in his composition and his efforts at recreating the simple movements of ritual dance while conveying the subtle eroticism characteristic of the M’sieur Entretoute avatar of Ghédé. Maya Deren called the Vodou dances “meditations of the body,” arguing that they should not be seen as means to secular pleasure, but dances in which the physical projects to the psyche, leading to communication with the spirits. Domond’s painting, with its use of the color purple as the means of connecting his musicians and dancers to Ghédé’s drapo and its ritualized yet sensual recreation of his dancing couples, captures the essential distinction between sacred and secular dance and affirms their role in sustaining the presence of the lwa among the living.

Auguste and Domond are concerned with depicting the importance of "mastery of ritual detail" in the summoning of the lwa into the human ceremony. Nehemy Jean, in his Mangé Loa (1949), shows how a community prepares for such a ceremony, capturing the detailed arrangements required to accomplish the sort of ritual mastery that will summon and please the spirits. His Mangé Loa is named after the most common ceremony in Vodou—the feeding of the spirits or mystères, as they are also known—whose aim is the restoration of the energy that is constantly drawn away from the lwa by their serviteurs. "In order to continue to travailler (work) with the mystères," Rigaud, Métraux, and Métraux have explained, "it is necessary to replenish their source of energy, an aim which is achieved both through the sacrifices and through the exercise of ritual powers during the service."29 The mangé lwa may involve the sacrifice of animals (birds, goats, chickens, and, on very special occasions, a bull) as well as offerings of drinks, cakes, and specialized dishes favored by the spirits. Once the offering "has become the property of the lwa, the participants can come closer to them by eating the food they have cooked for the spirits."30 Mangé lwa ceremonies usually end with the arrival of the Ghédé.

In Vodou, feeding the lwa is the individual’s foremost duty, a ritual of the greatest importance for adherents. Since the lwa’s function is that of organizing the physical and spiritual world into patterns of knowledge and well being for their devotees, their labor is cosmic and their energy must be replenished. It is the devotee’s responsibility to provide the wherewithal from which that energy is to flow by feeding the lwa. The ritual meals are prepared in accordance to time-honored traditions and must follow exact recipes and rules since the lwa are often hard to please. The choice of foods and method of preparation are often determined by the lwa’s attributes and personalities. They have favored foods and drinks that must be offered to them in specific ways. The various rituals of preparation of food for the lwa are part of the process of initiation, part of the konsans (knowledge) needed for moving up in the ounfò (temple’s) hierarchy. The elaborate rituals involved in the feeding of the lwa are a reminder that the most fundamental premise of Vodou is the notion of service. The title of serviteur borne by devotees implies a relationship of reciprocity between serviteurs and the spirits. The devotee who remembers to make a libation to the lwa by pouring on the ground a few drops of his morning coffee is recognizing that service to the spirit is a form of discipline that can bring its own reward. It is representative of adherence to a moral code that imposes certain obligations—some of them perhaps tedious and repetitive—but promise the possibility of divine intervention if it is ever needed.
Nehemy Jean's *Mangé Loa* (1949, figure 5.3) captures the Vodou community's preparation for such a ceremony. Jean, who joined the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince in 1947 under the auspices of Dieudonné Cedor, was born in 1931 in Limbé. He was among the fifty artists who left the Centre to form the short-lived Foyer des Arts Plastiques in 1950. A painter who has enjoyed considerable international success, Jean owned his own art gallery in Port-au-Prince, L'Atelier. He has lived in New York, where he attended the Arts Student League and Columbia University, and worked in Brazil in the late 1950s. His murals adorn the walls of the Port-au-Prince airport.

Jean's *Mangé Loa* focuses on the preparations of a ceremony apparently dedicated to Papa Zaka, as two of the serviteurs are depicted as preparing *tchaka*, a corn based food that is a favorite of Zaka. Papa Zaka's characteristic *makout* hangs from the tree and the scythe and machete also associated with the *lwa* lie on the ground. The absence of live animals being readied for sacrifice also supports the identification of the ceremony as one offered to the agricultural *lwa*. The painting could depict a *ceremony-yam*, a rare ritual offered to Papa Zaka, which involves the presentation of the first produce gathered from the fields in a plea for the *lwa*’s protection and assurance of a good crop for the following season. The painting captures, in the participants’ painstaking preparations, the notion central to Vodou ritual that “to participate properly is to engage divine benevolence.”

In Jean’s vibrant scene of ritual anticipation, the painter is careful to set his scene at dusk, the period of preparation for ceremonies that usually take place at night. The painting is organized around a series of scenes that, brought together, build for the viewer the overall sense of the various duties performed by serviteurs in preparation for a communal ceremony. Jean uses color and reflected light to move the viewer’s eye from tableau to tableau, building his scene by a process of accumulation which brings order to what at first look appears disconnected. The upper left quarter of the painting remains in shadows and moves our focus toward the ceremonial space. Seen clockwise, we find the *lwa*’s fruit-laden tree, framed on the right by a brightly lit orange fence. The same light illuminates the figure of a fresh arrival bringing provisions for the ceremony; the bright blue of his shirt and orange pants are duplicated diagonally across on a similar figure crouching on the lower left quadrant of the painting. Both men wear the simple denim shirt characteristic of Papa Zaka. The same orange color used for the fence and the men’s trousers highlights the *lwa*’s *makout*, as it hangs from a branch. Two figures near the right margin of the painting—one, that of a woman hugging the tree—look upward (in hope of shaking some fruit down?). They share the right quadrant of the painting with the three drummers—the traditional Rada *batterie* of *petit* or *bula*, *sèconde*, and *maman* drums—setting up for the ceremony and dance. The drummers, the “lynchpins” of the Vodou ceremony, are arranging their instruments, drawn here following the Rada tradition, with shells carved out of the trunks of trees in the shape of brightly painted truncated cones. Their heads, made out of goatskins, are stretched by pegs braced with cords. The lower left quadrant of the painting is occupied by three figures, one of which appears to be the drawer of the *nèvé* traced on the ground and of the uneven and as yet incomplete circle that attempts to circumscribe the ceremonial space. This space also includes objects used by the *onunan*
for divination: the playing cards that are usually spread in a lave or large straw tray, and the candles that some oungan use with a glass of water for the same purpose. At the very center of the painting are the vevé and the two central figures—head drawn together in a quasi-ceremonial salute—whose sacred task is that of preparing the food for the lwa. The vevé is similar to those drawn in honor of Papa Legba to ask for his blessing for the ceremony to come. As the gaze moves clockwise, the shadows of the upper left quadrant force the eye toward the center, where the principal focus of the ritual—the preparation of the lwa’s favorite food—is taking place. All the necessary supporting activities that will contribute to the ritual feeding of the lwa are depicted as surrounding the preparation of the food, the true cornerstone of the ritual.

In Divine Horsemen, Maya Deren speaks of the collective nature of Vodou as resting upon the “intense degree of dedication, devotion” that Nehemy Jean captures in the ritual preparations of his Mangu Lwa. She credits this collective effort with the ability to provide “the generally uncreative, often distracted individual with a prescribed movement and attitude, the very performance of which gradually involves and perhaps inspires him.” Service to the lwa, according to Deren, based as it is on mastery of the forms prescribed and favored by the spirits, allows the collective to function “at a level superior to the creative capacities of the individuals which make it up.” As a creative act, the performance of sacred forms confers grace, power, and knowledge on the serviteurs: “The individual participates in the accumulated genius of the collective, and by such participation becomes himself part of that genius—something more than himself.” Ira Lowenthal, in his study of Vodou ceremonies in southern Haiti, argued that the effectiveness of ritual is measured by its ability to “create a subjective reality for the servité [serviteurs] in which the essence of worship comes to be participation in the collective creation of song and dance.” It is clear, he added, “that Haitian aesthetic sensibilities are closely tied to the notion of full participation in the act of creation, rather than to passive contemplation or appreciation.”

Jean’s painting, with its focus on bodies providing their individual contributions to the steps prescribed for the collective ritual, highlights the reciprocal nature of the relationship between lwa and serviteur. The essence of the mangu lwa ceremony, as Hurbon has argued, is the nourishing of the lwa by the serviteurs in an effort to assure that the lwa will be capable of helping them when needed: “the sacrificial victim and the food constitute the link between the spirits and the faithful.” It represents yet another way in which Vodou provides...
by oungans, provide vital links between religious and civil society throughout Haiti. Among the best known of these societies are the Bizango, studied by Wade Davis in his research on the phenomenon of zombification. His two books on the subject, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) and *Passage of Darkness* (1988), reveal how secret societies function as “an important arbiter of social life among the peasantry,” a force “that protects community resources, particularly land, as they define the power boundaries of the village.” Davis’s research unveiled the Bizango’s role in the ethnobiology and pharmacopoeia behind the zombification process, a very rare form of “social sanction” administered by the secret society to those who have violated its most sacred codes. The Bizango, as Michel Laguerre explains in *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*, is a remnant of Haiti’s colonial past, when Bizango, the violent spirit of a warrior, functioned as the protective spirit of the Bissagot slaves. Individuals enter such secret societies—which are widespread throughout the island—through a ritual of rebirth or initiation that involves an oath of allegiance to the group and which admits them into a world of sharing the secret handshakes and passwords that are the marks of powerfully connected initiates. The societies stand “as the conscience of certain districts in Haiti in that [they] protect the residents against exploitation by outsiders.” In some districts in Haiti secret societies have played a crucial political role.

*Healing Ceremony with Music* is built around the central figure of the man on whose behalf the ceremony is being held, his nakedness and thinness presented as emblematic of the illness that must be eradicated. As in *Mangé Loa*, all the elements of the ceremony are included here, bearing witness to the painstaking preparation for the sacred work of healing, a ritual in which the *lwa* are expected to work their power through the body of the petitioner to restore its health and vitality. The food to be offered to the *lwa*, carefully prepared and attractively presented, is ready; jars, bottles, and pitchers give evidence of intense preparation and careful thought to everything that may be needed to propitiate the *lwa* and follow its dictates. The room has been arranged carefully to facilitate the ritual. The crowded scene illustrates the beginning of the ceremony, when everything is at the ready and the *oungan* is just beginning his invocations to the *lwa* with the aid of the musicians, *serviteurs* and relatives of the patient (identified by the absence of the society’s uniform).

At the feet of the patient is the *oungan* (or bokor, as they are often called in secret societies), holding in one hand a black cloth he brandishes before his patient and in the other one a candle indicative of his appeal to divination to diagnose the illness and seek the proper remedy with the advice of the Vodou spirits. Behind the *oungan* stands the *Rada batterie*—the three drummers with their variously sized sacred drums—accompanied by a woman playing a maraca made from a hollowed gourd. The music—appropriately, given the title of the painting—is regarded as the central element in the summoning of the *lwa*. To the *oungan’s* left stands an initiate who is represented holding the *oungan’s assen*, the sacred rattle used in summoning the *lwa*, which is the symbol of the *oungan’s* sacred profession. The initiated *ommis*, clapping and singing to the beat of the drums, line up against the back partition of the enclosed ceremonial room, formed by an elaborate curtain. The setting is characteristic of the often affluent surroundings of the secret society’s premises. Two ritual symbols flank the patient—the headstone with its cross for Bawon Samedi and the Ghédé to his right and the serpent for Danbala to his left—both represented amid flames. Together with the food and drink ready to be presented to the *lwa*, there are two sacrificial animals, a pig and a chicken, both of whose lives, as is typical of secret society ceremonies, will be offered to the *lwa* in exchange for the renewed health of the patient. The most salient element in the painting, however, may be the multiplicity of musical notes spread charmingly over the entire scene, indicating that the music has permeated all the possible spaces in the ceremonial area, unifying all the masterfully prepared ritual elements of the sacred work and reinforcing the summon to the *lwa*. The floating musical notes is a device that seeks to encapsulate the power of the drums to bring together all the elements of the ceremony: “the solid mass of the drum’s beating,” as Deren explains, is “at once compellingly dynamic and yet of a reliability, a stability, which transcends all miscellany, comprehends it, swallows it, holds steady with such unshakeable persistence that it serves as a magnetic core to which all temporary deviation returns.”

The prominent position accorded to the ritual symbols flanking the patient—those of Bawon Samdi and Danbala—underscore the patient’s position between life and death, and therefore the gravity of his illness. These *lwa* are invoked here because of their powers for healing or as potential givers of life. Ghédé, although best known as ruler of death and the cemetery, is also “the greatest of healers, the last recourse against death.” During ceremonies for Ghédé, the gravely ill are brought before the *lwa* for his intercession, since Ghédé, an essentially fair *lwa*, will not allow those who plead humbly for their health to die if their time has not come. Danbala, in turn, is the patriarchal serpent divinity, an ancient water spirit, linked in ritual and service
to rain, lightning, wisdom, and fertility. Those possessed by Danbala during ceremonies dart out their tongues, snake-like, crawl on the ground with sinuous movements, climb the posts of the peristil (the owner’s entry hall) and have been known to hang head down from the rafters like snakes. Danbala is always understood to be a positive force, the essence of life. In his Simbi avatar (with which Danbala shares many characteristics and functions) he rules over all magic—“whether it be medicinal, protective paquet, or the less benevolent wanga”—such as that depicted in Healing Ceremony with Music. (Bokors, unlike oungans, are reputed to also “work with the left hand”—to add to their regular functions as Vodou priests the ability to work with magic.) In the painting, Danbala is depicted by Léandre in his Petwo avatar of Danbala le Flambe (the torch), surrounded by fire.

The painting, in its mixing of elements drawn from both Rada (the drums, the worship of Danbala, for example) and Petwo rites (Ghède and the Bawon, the Simbi and Flambe avatars of Danbala), shows the richness of the two main sources of Vodou rites. In Haiti, the sacred forms through which the lwa are summoned to communicate with humans conform to one of two major rites, Rada and Petwo, which although manifestly different, share many common elements. The Rada rites, traced back to the kingdom of Dahomey, in what is now Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, are generally considered to be the most faithful to ancient African traditions, and to many believers, are the most genuine. They are invariably portrayed as dous (doux or sweet tempered). The Rada pantheon boasts the great lwa, or le Ginen, the first to be saluted in ceremonies: Atibon Legba, Marasa Dosou Dosa, Danbala and Ayida Wedo, Azaka Mede, Ogu Feray, Agwe Tawoyo, Ezili Freda Daome, Lasirenn and Labalenn, and Gede Nimbo. The Petwo rites do not lay claim to the same connection to the ancestral spirits. They are recognized as Creole or Haitian-born lwa, born in the crucible of the plantation and often incorporating belief and ritual practices drawn from central and southwest African groups such as the Kongo and Angola—late arrivals in the new world. Whereas the Rada lwa are thought to be dous, Petwo lwa are considered to be anme (amer or bitter). They are associated with fire and said to be lwa cho (lou chaud or hot lwa) capable of forceful and violent behavior. The Petwo pantheon includes major lwa such as Met Kalfou, Simbi Andezo, Ezili Danto, and Bawon Samdi. Many of the lwa, however, exist andez, or in two cosmic substances, and are served in both Rada and Petwo rituals.

Healing Ceremony with Music—with its display of the careful preparations involved in a major healing ceremony, its conveying of the power of music to invite the lwa into the human gathering, its placement of the patient between the two major healing and life-affirming lwa, its blending of Rada and Petwo rites—articulates with great clarity the importance of the mastery of ritual detail in Vodou’s sacred work. With its human body needing the intervention of the lwa and the support of his community at the very center of the painting, the work embodies the power of ritual mastery in Vodou’s sacred work.

I have attempted, through the analysis of the four works discussed above, to show how the concept of sacred work—with its aesthetic commitment to mastering ritual details as a path to securing the breaching of the divide between the world of the living and that of the lwa through the bodies of the serviteurs—has served both as inspiration, theme, and guiding aesthetic principle for a number of major Haitian artists interested in producing works that fall under the category of religious paintings. My analysis, dependent as it is on an understanding of how carefully the mastery of ritual elements is represented in these paintings, begs the question of the paintings’ implied audience and, perhaps, purpose. It is undoubtedly true that a significant number of Haitian paintings, especially in the first two generations of painters from the Centre d’Art, centered on Vodou ceremonies as a thematic focus. For its Haitian audience, these paintings captured a world of ritual practices and embodied beliefs that encapsulated the essence of their spiritual world. This encapsulation both opened this ceremonial world to outsiders and created multileveled modes of representation, not all of which could be easily read by an audience not versed in Vodou practices.

Toussaint Auguste’s Papa Zaka en Possession is a case in point. We do not know much about the circumstances of its production, other than its connection to the Centre d’Art created by DeWitt Peters in 1944. Whether created for the market following Peters’ suggestions as to desirable subjects, or commissioned by a collector, the painting opens its full meaning only to those who bring knowledge of the specificities of possession to its reading. A first confrontation with the painting without knowledge of its title does not readily yield its subject matter, as it is not a stereotypical depiction of possession. The reciprocity of the relationship expressed through the mirroring of the lwa in its horse is created by an inspired, imaginative solution to the question of representation that masks its true meaning from the casual observer, to whom the painting may look like a scene of two peasants greeting each other in a despoiled countryside. This masking, similar to the one that led to the masking of the lwa behind chromolithographs and plaster statues of the Catholic saints, allows
Auguste to move away from the conventional symbols of possession into a representation that is both full of religious and ritual content and alive with aesthetic substance. These multiple levels of significance—which become increasingly accessible the deeper the viewers’ knowledge of the beliefs and practices of Vodou—speak to the painting’s status as religious art and to its evoking a sense of awe from its viewers. Writing about European religious painting, F. David Martin speaks of how the “awe-fullness evoked by the sacred is not supposed to enter a representation that is both full of religious and ritual content viewers.” Writing about European religious painting, F. David Martin speaks of how the “awe-fullness evoked by the sacred is not supposed to enter a representation that is both full of religious and ritual content viewers.” In Papa Zaka en Possession, as in the other paintings discussed above, this sense of “awe-fullness” stems from the careful representation of the principle of mastery in ritual practice, as an element that conveyed the spirit of Vodou as a belief system. For a non-Haitian audience, one not necessarily aware of the significance of the ritual elements displayed, the paintings nonetheless capture the complexity of belief and, perhaps most importantly, the quality of mastery which, drawn from Vodou practice itself, finds its way into the aesthetic dimension of the art itself.

NOTES


9. Ibid., 29.

Much was on her mind, so much that her head began to ache. What she really needed now was a reprieve so that she could get her thoughts together and think clearly about her options. Maybe a dip in cool waters would be a perfect antidote to her headache and provide a needed escape from the hot, humid summer day. Seeking relief, the orisha¹ Ochún, the African Aphrodite, made her way to the Osun River.² There she slipped out of her clothes and eased herself into the refreshing, clear waters. In these waters, she had always found safety and clarity. As she leisurely bathed, she felt reenergized, her options becoming clearer. After the passing of hours, she slowly emerged from the waters. She undid her long hair so that it cascaded down her narrow back—its ends gently caressing the voluptuous curves of her hips as she walked toward a shaded area by the river banks. Wet and naked, she sat down and gingerly combed the curls of her strikingly dark hair that gently dangled on the sides of her long slender neck. Anyone who might have walked by and observed this bare goddess admiring herself in a hand mirror would easily conclude that she was the most beautiful among all beauties of Africa. Of course, if Ochún would have noticed the passing stranger, with a haughty paternalistic look, she would have dismissed him.

With each stroke of her tortoise shell comb, the numerous gold bracelets adorning her slim wrists jingled and chimed, producing the seductive musical enrapture of an alluring and intoxicating siren. Once dried, she arose and tied a yellow handkerchief around her petite waist to hold up her revealing and flowing skirt ornamented...