

**The Haitian Artist Hector Hyppolite: The Aesthetic Convergence of Vodou, *Négritude*, and  
Surrealism**

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: The Haitian Artist Hector Hyppolite: The Aesthetic Convergence of Vodou, *Négritude*, and Surrealism

The modern Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite (1894-1948) is commonly remembered as the “Grand Maître” of Haitian art because of his transformative role in the Haitian modern art sphere, open practice and veneration of Vodou, and international acclaim by surrealism. Scholarship to date has largely approached Hyppolite as either a Haitian icon or a surrealist-at-large. In this thesis, I argue for the reception of Hyppolite’s work from the multiple perspectives of Vodou, *Négritude*, and surrealism, which each contribute to Hyppolite’s success both throughout his lifetime and after. This work places particular focus on the ways in which Hyppolite simultaneously functioned as a patriotic national icon and a surrealist-at-large despite these two movements' discordant ideologies.

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## Table of Contents

I. INTRODUCTION .....	9
II. HYPOLITE FROM PRIMITIVE GENIUS TO MODERN ARTIST .....	12
III. HECTOR HYPOLITE: <i>HOUNGAN</i> , PAINTER, AND NATIONAL ICON .....	17
IV. HYPOLITE IN THE CARIBBEAN CONTEXT .....	28
VODOU SUPPRESSION AND REVIVAL IN HAITI: THE CONDITIONS OF HYPOLITE’S ARTISTIC PRODUCTION ..	28
HYPOLITE AS THE “GRAND MAÎTRE” OF HAITIAN ART .....	40
HYPOLITE AS AN EMBODIMENT OF THE NÉGRITUDE MOVEMENT .....	44
V. AN APPRAISAL OF HYPOLITE AS A SURREALIST-AT-LARGE .....	55
VI. THE LEGACY OF HYPOLITE.....	62
IMAGE APPENDIX .....	64
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	88

## LIST OF FIGURES

- FIGURE 1: HYPOLITE AND DEWITT PETERS AT THE CENTRE D'ART IN PORT-AU-PRINCE IN 1947, A BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY SELDEN RODMAN, PUBLISHED IN RODMAN'S 1988 BOOK *HAITI: WHERE ART IS JOY*..... 64
- FIGURE 2: HECTOR HYPOLITE, *ADORATION À LA SAINTE VIERGE*, 1945, OIL ON CARDBOARD, 74.5 X 66.3 CM (29 3/8 X 26 1/8 IN., ASSOCIATION ATELIER ANDRÉ BRETON, [HTTPS://WWW.ANDREBRETON.FR/EN/WORK/56600100894670](https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600100894670)..... 65
- FIGURE 3: HYPOLITE WITH TWO OF HIS PAINTINGS: *THE VODOO GOD, MASTER ADAM AND THE GODDESS ADANIZAU, HIS MISTRESS*, 1945, BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY FROM BRETON'S TRIP TO HAITI, ASSOCIATION ATELIER ANDRÉ BRETON, [HTTPS://WWW.ANDREBRETON.FR/EN/WORK/56600101000792](https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600101000792)..... 66
- FIGURE 4: A DINNER PREPARED BY MADAME HYPOLITE IN THEIR HOUSE, 1945, BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY FROM BRETON'S TRIP TO HAITI, ASSOCIATION ATELIER ANDRÉ BRETON, [HTTPS://WWW.ANDREBRETON.FR/EN/WORK/56600101000792](https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600101000792)..... 67
- FIGURE 5: HYPOLITE PAINTING *MASTER ADAMI*, 1945, BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY FROM BRETON'S TRIP TO HAITI, ASSOCIATION ATELIER ANDRÉ BRETON, [HTTPS://WWW.ANDREBRETON.FR/EN/WORK/56600101000792](https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600101000792)..... 68
- FIGURE 6: HANDWRITTEN TEXT BY ANDRÉ BRETON DEDICATED TO HECTOR HYPOLITE, DATED OCTOBER 1948, ASSOCIATION ATELIER ANDRÉ BRETON, [HTTPS://WWW.ANDREBRETON.FR/EN/WORK/56600100924520](https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600100924520)..... 69
- FIGURE 7: A TRANSCRIPT OF PHILIPPE THOBY-MARCELIN'S SPEECH FOR HYPOLITE'S FUNERAL THAT HE SENT TO ANDRÉ BRETON IN 1948, ASSOCIATION ATELIER ANDRÉ BRETON, [HTTPS://WWW.ANDREBRETON.FR/EN/WORK/56600101000791](https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600101000791)..... 70
- FIGURE 8: HECTOR HYPOLITE, *UNE PROSTITUÉE*, 1946, OIL ON BOARD, COURTESY THE GALLERY OF EVERYTHING © HECTOR HYPOLITE THE GALLERY OF EVERYTHING ..... 71

- FIGURE 9: GREETING CARD FROM HECTOR HYPPOLITE ADDRESSED TO ANDRÉ BRETON FOR THE NEW YEAR 1948, ASSOCIATION ATELIER ANDRÉ BRETON, [HTTPS://WWW.ANDRÉBRETON.FR/EN/WORK/56600101000793](https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600101000793)..... 72
- FIGURE 10: JASON SELEY, HECTOR HYPPOLITE DEATH MASK, 1948, METAL, 7 3/4 X 4 7.8 X 4 INCHES, THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/JASON-SELEY-HECTOR-HYPPOLITE-DEATH-MASK-1948](https://haitianartsociety.org/jason-seley- Hector-hyppolite-death-mask-1948). .... 73
- FIGURE 11: PAGE 124 FROM THE FEBRUARY 21, 1852 ISSUE OF *L'ILLUSTRATION* IN WHICH VODOU DANCING IN THE STREETS TO CELEBRATE SOULOUQUE'S RETURN TO THE CAPITAL IS DEPICTED, HAITI TRUST, [HTTPS://BABEL.HATHITRUST.ORG/CGI/PT?ID=UC1.C008845729&SEQ=132&Q1=FEB+21+...](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=UC1.C008845729&seq=132&q1=FEB+21+...) 74
- FIGURE 12: ALEXANDER KING, ILLUSTRATION OF ZOMBIES IN *THE MAGIC ISLAND*, PRINTED IN SEABROOK'S BOOK *THE MAGIC ISLAND* IN 1929..... 75
- FIGURE 13: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *VOL DE ZOMBIS*, 1946, OIL ON CARDBOARD, 66 X 81 CM., THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/VOL-DE-ZOMBIS](https://haitianartsociety.org/vol-de-zombis)..... 76
- FIGURE 14: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *HENRI CHRISTOPHE CALLING THE SPIRITS*, 1946-47, OIL ON BOARD, 29 X 21 IN., THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/HYPPOLITE-HENRI-CHRISTOPHE-CALLING-THE-SPIRITS-1946-47](https://haitianartsociety.org/hyppolite-henri-christophe-calling-the-spirits-1946-47). .... 77
- FIGURE 15: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *OGOU FERAY*, 1945, OIL ON BOARD, 52 X 71 CM., THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/HECTOR-HYPPOLITE-OGOU-FERAY-1945](https://haitianartsociety.org/hector-hyppolite-ogou-feray-1945).. 78
- FIGURE 16: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *DAMBALLAH LE FLAMBEAU*, 1946-48, OIL ON BOARD, 30 X 24 IN., THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/DAMBALLAH-LE-FLAMBEAU-1946-48](https://haitianartsociety.org/damballah-le-flambeau-1946-48). .... 79
- FIGURE 17: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *DAMBALLAH LE FLAMBEAU*, 1946-48, OIL ON BOARD, 30 X 24 IN., THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/HECTOR-HYPPOLITE-DAMBALLAH-LA-FLAMBEAU-1946-48](https://haitianartsociety.org/hector-hyppolite-damballah-la-flambeau-1946-48). .... 80

FIGURE 18: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *UNTITLED (HARBOR TOWN)*, 1946-48, OIL ON BOARD, 21.5 X 18.25 IN., THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/HECTOR-HYPPOLITE-UNTITLED-HARBOR-TOWN-1944-48](https://haitianartsociety.org/hector-hyppolite-untitled-harbor-town-1944-48). ..... 81

FIGURE 19: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *PURIFICATION CEREMONY*, 1948, OIL ON BOARD, 46.5 X 34.6 IN., THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/HECTOR-HYPPOLITE-PURIFICATION-CEREMONY-1948](https://haitianartsociety.org/hector-hyppolite-purification-ceremony-1948). ..... 82

FIGURE 20: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *NATIONAL FLAG*, 1948, OIL ON CARDBOARD MOUNTED ON WOOD, 29 15/16 X 26 5/16 IN., CREDIT TO HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, DC, THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/NATIONAL-FLAG](https://haitianartsociety.org/national-flag). ..... 83

FIGURE 21: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *LE PRESIDENT FLORVIL HYPPOLITE*, 1945-47, OIL AND PENCIL ON PAPER BOARD, THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/HECTOR-HYPPOLITE-LE-PRESIDENT-FLORVIL-HYPPOLITE-1945-1947](https://haitianartsociety.org/hector-hyppolite-le-president-florvil-hyppolite-1945-1947). ..... 84

FIGURE 22: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *ABITAN*, DATE UNKNOWN, OIL ON BOARD, COURTESY OF THE ASTRID JAEGER COLLECTION, PRINTED IN *MYSTICAL IMAGINATION: THE ART OF HAITIAN MASTER HECTOR HYPPOLITE*. ..... 85

FIGURE 23: HECTOR HYPPOLITE, *ABITAN*, DATE UNKNOWN, OIL ON BOARD, COURTESY OF THE ASTRID JAEGER COLLECTION, PRINTED IN *MYSTICAL IMAGINATION: THE ART OF HAITIAN MASTER HECTOR HYPPOLITE*. ..... 86

FIGURE 24: RIGAUD BENOIT, *THE RECALL OF HECTOR HYPPOLITE*, 1978, OIL ON BOARD, 32 X 24 IN., CREDIT TO THE ASTRID JAEGER COLLECTION, THE HAITIAN ART SOCIETY, [HTTPS://HAITIANARTSOCIETY.ORG/RECALL-OF-HECTOR-HYPPOLITE-1978](https://haitianartsociety.org/recall-of-hector-hyppolite-1978). ..... 87

## I. Introduction

For contemporaries of the Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite (1894-1948), he was a monumental, inspiring, and globally reaching artist with influence throughout the Caribbean, Europe, and the Americas. The Haitian writer Félix Morisseau-Leroy's poem "Popo is Dead," which was written for Hyppolite's funeral in 1948, highlights Hyppolite's enormous role in Haitian modern art and culture. The term "Popo" lovingly refers to Hyppolite's paternal status in the modern Haitian art community. "Popo loved us/ Popo made us enter the National Palace/ He made us enter UNESCO/ He made us cross the sea," emphasizes Hyppolite's reception in the high cultural and political spheres of the National Palace in Haiti and UNESCO, headquartered in Paris, in addition to his connection to Haitian citizens generally. Morisseau-Leroy's use of the term "us" suggests Hyppolite's stature as a conduit between these spheres and Haitian citizens. Another portion references Hyppolite's Vodou faith: "Everyone is sad/ Popo is dead/ Where are the *loas*?/ Where are the saints?/ Where are the dead?/ Hector Hyppolite is dead/ Baron Samedi is wearing black."<sup>1</sup> While Haitian citizens feel the loss of Hyppolite in the first passage, the Vodou community, including the *loas* themselves, mourns the death of Hyppolite in this passage. Finally, Morisseau-Leroy highlights Hyppolite's global status and ends the poem with "Send the news to New York/ Send the news to Paris/ Send the news to Rio... What will we tell Breton? What will we tell Mabelle What will we tell Marguerite? Hector Hyppolite is dead."<sup>2</sup> News of

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<sup>1</sup> Baron Samedi is the Haitian Vodou *loa*, or spirit, of the dead.

<sup>2</sup> Morisseau-Leroy refers to Western figures connected to Haitian modern art, including André Breton and Pierre Mabelle. Félix Morisseau-Leroy, "Popo is Dead," in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 101.

Hyppolite's death is felt in the United States, France, and Brazil, with figures such as surrealism's founder André Breton, surrealist Pierre Mabile, and Hyppolite's past love from a visit to Africa, Marguerite (also spelled as Magritte), who must be informed of his passing. Hyppolite's legacy in Haitian art has remained intact through the contemporary era, with the Haitian Art Society naming 2008 the "Year of Hyppolite." Hyppolite's depiction of Vodou and reverence within the Haitian art community earned him the title of "Grand Maître" or "Vodou master" of Haitian art. However, despite Hector Hyppolite's venerated status within Haitian modern art and his relationship with Western avant-garde leaders, he has been largely left out of the canon of art history outside of Haiti until recently. Furthermore, within the limited Western discourse of Hyppolite, previous scholarship has emphasized Hyppolite's appreciation through the lens of Western art sphere figures, particularly American watercolorist Dewitt Peters and surrealist André Breton, as a "primitive genius." In this thesis, I argue for the significance and reception of Hyppolite's work not only through the lens of the Western avant-garde but also in terms of Vodou and the *Négritude* movement. Hyppolite's professional success and aesthetic practice cannot be understood outside of the contexts of Vodou revival, the *Négritude* movement, and Western modernism. Hyppolite should not be restricted to being understood as a figure exclusively in either Haitian/Caribbean or as a creative influence in Western modern art history. Rather, Hyppolite is best understood through a blended approach of both fields of research. There has been a tendency to consider Hyppolite as a figure of global modernism, Black modernism, Haitian art, naive art, and Vodou aesthetics with stark differentiation and minimal consideration of his place within other fields of study. My thesis aims to place these areas of research in conversation with each other, as each of these facets of Hyppolite's identity

is inextricable from each other in offering a holistic study of the art of Hector Hyppolite. This thesis aims to explicate Hyppolite's significance within Haitian and global modern art practices by tracing Hyppolite's historical position and role within the broader movements of Vodou cultural revival in Haiti, the *Négritude* movement, and surrealism. This work places particular focus on the ways in which Hyppolite simultaneously functioned as a patriotic national icon and a surrealist-at-large despite these two movements' discordant ideologies.

## II. Hyppolite from Primitive Genius to Modern Artist

Secondary scholarship on the Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite is limited because of his historically marginalized position within the Western canon and the varied methodological approaches taken to discussing his work. Hyppolite is mentioned in studies of global modernism, Black modernism, Haitian art, and Vodou aesthetics. Within these studies, he is often allocated as little as a couple of paragraphs to as much as a short chapter; there has been no account that connects these different contexts relevant for his art. The formative scholarship described Hyppolite as a primitive genius, emphasizing the lack of technical skill and divine influence upon his art. As the scholarship on Hyppolite progressed, he was understood strictly in terms of Vodou aesthetics and Haitian culture. Recently, Hyppolite has been recognized by scholars as a modern artist, highlighting his ties to the modernist movement of surrealism while also acknowledging his momentous impact on Haitian modern art in particular.

American writer, art critic, and Latin American and Caribbean enthusiast Selden Rodman was one of the first scholars to conduct a study on Hyppolite (Figure 1). Rodman's work marks the initial publication of research on Hyppolite as an individual artist. Rodman was a close collaborator and friend of Dewitt Peters, who had founded the art and cultural center, Centre d'Art in 1947, where Hyppolite eventually exhibited his works. He was able to visit Hyppolite personally in 1947 and subsequently provides a biographical overview and interpretations of Hyppolite's art in his many books on Haitian art. *Renaissance in Haiti: Popular Painters in the Black Republic* (1948) dedicates a chapter to Hyppolite, discussing his life prior to his "discovery" by Western artists, his "years of achievement," and his work and style, often stressing the significance of Vodou in Hyppolite's life. *Haiti: the Black Republic*

(1954) includes a short passage on the role of religion in Hyppolite's art entitled "The Artist as Priest: Hector Hyppolite," noting Hyppolite's artistic production while in a state of trance due to possession by the *loas* and explaining the various Vodou symbols and figures depicted regularly in Hyppolite's art. *The Miracle of Haitian Art* (1974) provides a chapter further discussing the "Discovery of Hector Hyppolite" as well as a chapter titled "Hyppolite Reborn," comparing the work of Haitian painter André Pierre (1914-2005) to Hyppolite. Finally, *Haiti: Where Art is Joy* (1988) includes a reprint of Rodman's discovery story of Hyppolite from the previous publication. Each of these works places particular attention on the narrative of Hyppolite's discovery and his lack of technical skill, which can be overlooked as a result of the divine intervention of the *loas* in Hyppolite's work. Rodman's work is an important contribution to the discourse of Hyppolite because not only did he begin the scholarly discourse of Hyppolite, but he also called attention to the significance of Vodou to Hyppolite's aesthetic practice.

However, his work has been recently criticized by scholars for its primitivization of Haitian art and its reflection of unequal hierarchies between North American and European scholars and Haitian citizens. Art historian Luis M. Castañeda criticizes Rodman's role in modern Haitian art history in his 2014 article "Island Culture Wars: Selden Rodman and Haiti." Castañeda views Rodman's interest in Haiti and his access to Haitian artists, such as Hyppolite, as a direct result of "U.S. cultural interventionism." Furthermore, Castañeda argues Rodman promoted artists at the Centre d'Art as "primitive" and therefore "authentic," which "narrowly

stimulated one strand of artistic production in Haiti” and has played an active role in perpetuating racial stereotypes and imperialist conceptions of Haitian modern art.<sup>3</sup>

After Rodman’s scholarship, there is a gap in historical discourse of Hyppolite, apart from inclusions of his work as visual examples within surveys of Haitian and Vodou art or exhibition catalogs. Hyppolite is referenced as an influential figure in *Kafou: Haiti, Art and Vodou* (2012), which focuses on Hyppolite’s role as one of the few Haitian artists to receive large-scale appreciation and patronage for his Vodou-informed art. The 2013 work *Masterpieces of Haitian Art: Seven Decades of Unique Visual Heritage* includes Hyppolite as a transformational figure between the emphasis on realistic, European-based artistic practice in Haiti to “authentic Haitian cultural production.” He has also been briefly mentioned in various exhibition catalogs since 1988, beginning with the exhibition *Haiti: Art Naif, Art Vaudou: Exposition 1988* in Paris, where a few of his Vodou-based works were exhibited. This catalog provides a brief biography of Hyppolite that examines the influence of his practice of Vodou on his life and art, offering a very similar approach to Hyppolite as Rodman’s scholarship. There are limited museum references to Hyppolite again until 2019-2023.

In 2019, Hyppolite reemerges as an artist of study by scholars and institutions of modern art. Beginning with his inclusion in Charlotte Barat and Darby English’s study of the Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) historical treatment of Black artists and representations of Blackness entitled *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA* (2019). In this study, the authors take issue with earlier considerations of Hyppolite as an exoticized outsider. Additionally, he was included in

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<sup>3</sup> Luis M. Castañeda, “Island Culture Wars: Selden Rodman and Haiti,” *Art Journal* (New York. 1960) 73, no. 3 (2014): 59, doi:10.1080/00043249.2014.993280.

the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2021 exhibition *Surrealism Beyond Borders*. The accompanying essay, "Haiti, Martinique, Cuba," by Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel chiefly refers to Hyppolite as a source of inspiration and an artist praised by surrealism's founder, André Breton. Finally, Hyppolite was included in the 2023 exhibition *Surrealism and Us: Caribbean and African Diasporic Artists since 1940* at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. This work aims to situate Hyppolite within Western avant-garde practices while also recognizing the social, political, and racial contexts of his work; this catalog provides the most complete approach to Hyppolite to date.

In 2011 and 2012, however, Hyppolite was the subject of two multi-authored monographs. The first is a French publication titled *Hector Hyppolite, 1891-1948* (2011) by the Comité Hector Hyppolite, which brings together French scholarship on the life and legacy of Hyppolite. The second is the Haitian publication, *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master Hector Hyppolite* (2012), by the Haitian Art Society; this volume brings together the English-language translated writings of Caribbean scholars and contemporaries of Hyppolite as well as collectors and researchers of his work to provide a thorough overview of Hyppolite's life, his influences, and his legacy. These works aim to integrate the disparate historiography of Hyppolite and provide a robust, multifaceted approach to Hyppolite.

The Comité Hector Hyppolite and the Haitian Art Society's volumes emphasize Hyppolite's influence on Haitian modern art and his lasting cultural legacy. These works synthesize primary and secondary scholarship on Hyppolite, producing a thorough analysis of his life, artistic practices, religious iconography, and influences. It also includes an analysis of a relationship with Western avant-garde movements and legacy. The Comité Hector Hyppolite and

the Haitian Art Society's projects were inspired by the Haitian government's proclamation of 2008 as "The Year of Hyppolite." "The Year of Hyppolite" was intended to include exhibitions, parades, and lectures on Hyppolite's work in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. However, many of these activities had to be canceled due to widespread riots and political protests in April 2008 over food prices. This resulted in the dismissal of Prime Minister Jacques-Édouard Alexis in April and a subsequent struggle for Parliament to confirm a replacement until late July. Additionally, in 2008, Haiti experienced four devastating hurricanes and tropical storms: Fay, Gustav, Hannah, and Ike. These storms resulted in nearly 800 deaths and 150,000 displaced. Despite these tragedies and setbacks, the Comité Hector Hyppolite and the Haitian Art Society continued their book projects that were originally intended for this event.

While the discourse on Hyppolite is sporadic, it has shifted throughout the years from approaching Hyppolite as a "primitive" genius to examining his role in Vodou art, Haitian art, surrealism, and Black modernism. However, this thesis views each of these fields as overlapping components of Hyppolite's significance within art history. Vodou and Haitian art became interdependent after the *Indigénisme* movement in the early twentieth century, while the study of Black modernism became an expansion of *Négritude* philosophy, and surrealism functioned as a bridge for the reception of Hyppolite both as a Vodouist and a Black modernist. This project aims to bridge the discourse of Hyppolite's place in the historiography of Haitian art as well as surrealism. This thesis contextualizes Hyppolite across these various fields, synthesizing multiple facets of his identity as opposed to separating them.

### III. Hector Hyppolite: *Houngan*, Painter, and National Icon

The Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite (1894-1948) has been a confounding figure for both his contemporaries and art historians alike due to the conflicting accounts of his life, as seen even in the details provided by Hyppolite himself. As a result, it can be challenging for scholars to find a detailed and reliable biography of Hyppolite. Although scholars largely agree that Hyppolite was born in 1894 in St. Marc, Haiti, a large port town surrounded by mountains, a 2011 publication from the Comité Hector Hyppolite proposed an alternative date and place of September 15, 1891, in Rivière Froide, a town outside of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his life, Hyppolite claimed to descend from a line of *houngans* (male Vodou priests), including his father and grandfather, yet there is some debate about whether he was a practicing *houngan*. However, he was certainly known to be revered in his community for having healing abilities. When asked by the Haitian poet Philippe Thoby-Marcelin whether he was a *houngan*, he replied, “Yes, sir, I am a *houngan*... but I do not do it as a job, I’m never paid by people who come to see me. I treat illnesses free of charge.”<sup>5</sup>

It is unclear when Hyppolite began to paint. He apprenticed to a shoemaker as a young boy but abandoned this early on to earn a living through his painting. Eventually, he made money by painting postcards for American Marines stationed in Haiti and painting local businesses and homes. He is noted to have relied mainly on pieces of cardboard as a canvas for his work as well as potentially chicken feathers for paintbrushes and house paint during his early works, with a transition to oil paint later in his career. Around the time of the First World War,

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<sup>4</sup> *Hector Hyppolite, 1891?-1948*, Paris: Éditions de Capri / Comité Hector Hyppolite, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Michel-Philippe Lerebours, “In Search of Hector Hyppolite,” in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 30.

he boarded a freighter and spent several months living and working in Camagüey, Cuba. The next five years of Hyppolite's life remain the most widely disputed. Some scholars claim that he left Haiti much later than he states due to the birth of his daughter, Hermite, in 1916.<sup>6</sup> According to Rodman, Hyppolite claims to have traveled from Cuba to New York with a painter named Echeberry. The pair then took a freighter from New York to French Equatorial Africa. Once in Africa, they first visited the Dahomey temple and then proceeded on foot on a three-year trek to Abyssinia. During this time, Hyppolite supported himself by painting floral decorations on the chamber pots of local hostleries, which "were the best-painted chamber pots in the world," by his own account. Hyppolite spent the following two years living and working in Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup>

However, even Rodman admits that Hyppolite was not very forthcoming about his time in Ethiopia, and many details remain unknown. The only evidence Rodman supplies in support of Hyppolite's life in Ethiopia is the similarities in Hyppolite's work and Ethiopian art in terms of the almond-eye shape and the depiction of Coptic demons, asserting that "it is easy to believe that the artist has more than a racial memory of the gaudy Byzantine frescoes in the rock monasteries of Kwarata and Aduwa."<sup>8</sup> French writer Jean-Marie Drot claims that during his stay in Africa, Hyppolite met and fell in love with a woman named Magritte Jackenson and lived with her on the island of Caradjine. However, as Drot points out, the island of Caradjine has never been found on a map and remains a complete mystery.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hermite would become the wife of Hyppolite's fellow Centre d'Art painter Rigaud Benoit. *Hector Hyppolite, 1891?-1948*, Paris: Éditions de Capri / Comité Hector Hyppolite.

<sup>7</sup> Selden Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti: Popular Painters in the Black Republic* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948), 64.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Marie Drot, *Haiti: Art Naïf, Art Vaudou: Exposition 1988* (Paris, 1988), 122.

Rodman concedes that, “it is entirely possible that Hyppolite never traveled to Africa, that the experience took shape first in his mind, partly as an escape from the frustrations of a life in Haiti that offered no rewards for his artistic ambitions, and partly as the fulfillment of a wish, an effort to identify himself more closely with ancestral, religious and artistic images.”<sup>10</sup> Art historian Michel-Philippe Lerebours points out that almost thirty years after Rodman’s analysis of Hyppolite’s life in Africa, other scholars come to similar conclusions. For example, the German-American art critic, author, and gallerist Ute Stebich views this trip as evidence that Hyppolite sought to strengthen his racial and spiritual identity: “stories of five years of drifting across Africa are a sign of his thirst to know the continent of his racial and spiritual origins.”<sup>11</sup> For Stebich, regardless of whether Hyppolite really visited Africa or not, the story is important because it exemplifies his personal longing for an ancestral connection.

Whether or not he spent time abroad, it is certain that from 1920 on, Hyppolite once again resided in Haiti. He is said to have wandered from town to town upon his return, attempting to stave off poverty by painting wherever he went, until finally settling in St. Marc. His hometown of St. Marc was a large port town, allowing for many opportunities for day labor as well as small souvenir painting. Rodman classifies this as a time of great “melancholy” for Hyppolite. He turned to his faith, “losing himself in the ritual of his faith, composing magnificent fêtes and apocalyptic compositions in his mind’s eye.”<sup>12</sup> Hyppolite elaborated on the anguish he

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<sup>10</sup> Selden Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti: Popular Painters in the Black Republic* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Michel-Philippe Lerebours, “In Search of Hector Hyppolite,” in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 29.

<sup>12</sup> Selden Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti: Popular Painters in the Black Republic* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948), 64.

experienced during this time, stating that John the Baptist, who he claimed directed his art during the height of his career, was “silent” during these years.<sup>13</sup>

Sometime around 1944, on a drive back from visiting Haitian painter Philomé Obin, Peters first saw Hyppolite’s work. In an article Peters wrote titled “Discovering of Hector Hyppolite,” he recalls, “I caught sight, out of the corner of my eye, of the gaily painted doors of a small bar. There was no time to see any details and I have thought it was a miracle I saw them at all. Was there some latent and powerful force in those simple designs which hypnotized?”<sup>14</sup> Upon Peters’ return to Port-au-Prince, he claims to have asked his good friend, the Haitian writer and poet Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, to try and locate the artist he had seen. After Thoby-Marcelin found Hyppolite, Peters immediately traveled to St. Marc to meet him.

In a 1947 interview with *Harper’s Bazaar*, Peters described his first impressions of Hyppolite as “a Vodou priest in his middle fifties” and “like the great mystic-painters of the past.”<sup>15</sup> According to Rodman, Hyppolite told Peters that his visit was of no surprise, as he had had a vision of it in a dream. Peters invited Hyppolite to join the Centre d’Art, which had been founded in 1944 in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince and functioned as a workspace, gallery, and meeting place for intellectuals interested in Caribbean art as well as many key artists of Haitian modern art. According to the Haitian Art Society, it was a “cosmopolitan meeting ground for artists, curators, critics, and collectors from Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean, Europe, and North America, and served as a place where seminal ideas about modernism, popular

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>14</sup> Dewitt Peters, “Discovering of Hector Hyppolite,” in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Luis M. Castañeda, “Island Culture Wars: Selden Rodman and Haiti,” *Art Journal (New York. 1960)* 73, no. 3 (2014): 59, doi:10.1080/00043249.2014.993280.

culture, and Caribbean art were being explored and articulated.”<sup>16</sup> The Centre d’Art was a large, villa-like institution that included many studio spaces, meeting rooms, and galleries to exhibit members’ art and distributed a magazine titled *Studio No. 3* to promote the artists and ideals of the Centre d’Art. The Centre d’Art boasted international acclaim and patronage, including the Cuban art critic and curator José Gómez-Sicre, the founder of surrealism André Breton, and Cuban painter Wifredo Lam. In addition, the institution had an active working relationship with Alfred Barr and René d’Harnoncourt, the early directors of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who, through the Centre d’Art, acquired several Haitian works for the collection. Hyppolite’s 1946 painting *The Congo Queen* is likely among the works acquired by the MoMA through the Centre d’Art.

Hyppolite accepted to join the Centre d’Art both in compliance with the prophecy he received as well as for financial gain. Peters remarks, “with a new lease on life and encouraged by sales which we were beginning to make for him,” Hyppolite soon after his initiation into the Centre d’Art left St. Marc and moved to Port-au-Prince.<sup>17</sup> Hyppolite was very creative during this period, working constantly, rapidly, and passionately. Rodman claims Hyppolite to be so reinvigorated that just seven days after being invited to join the Centre d’Art, he appeared at Peters’ office with sixteen newly finished paintings. Hyppolite’s joining the Centre d’Art marked his official emergence into the professionalized, global art world.

Hyppolite’s inauguration into the Centre d’Art not only marked a shift in his career but a shift within the Haitian art scene as well. Prior to Hyppolite’s participation at the Centre d’Art,

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<sup>16</sup> “Le Centre D’art,” Haitian Art Society, accessed May 8, 2025, <https://haitianartsociety.org/le-centre-d-art>.

<sup>17</sup> Selden Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti: Popular Painters in the Black Republic* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948), 65.

the main focus of Haitian modern art aesthetics pursued by Peters and Thoby-Marcelin in their talent scouting and recruitment had been naive artists, which was then promoted as uniquely Haitian. Outside of the Centre d'Art, bourgeois Haitian society favored realist art, which included Catholic themes and European perspectival conventions. The Centre d'Art's founder and members hoped to capitalize on the growing Western interest in "authentic" Haitian culture and the rising *Indigénisme* movement, which both emphasized elements of Haitian proletarian daily life, connectiveness to African culture, current events, and folkloric aspects. The Centre d'Art sought artists and buyers with these cultural developments in mind in order to promote Haitian naive artists and establish a Haitian art scene removed from European aesthetic conventions.

One of the earliest artists invited to the Centre d'Art was Philomé Obin, a self-taught Haitian painter whose work often depicted everyday street scenes, past Haitian political figures, and current Haitian and American political figures. Obin's work, as well as that of other early members of the Centre d'Art, including Wilson Bigaud and Préfète Duffaut, at this time focused on scenes of everyday Haitian life. Stylistically, their paintings employed vivid colors and unrealistic perspectives. They were praised for their "primitiveness" due to their lacking formal artistic training and for their "authenticity" in regard to their representation of working-class Haitians. This birthed the naive Haitian art scene sponsored by the Centre d'Art. According to Carlo Avierl Célius, after Hyppolite's success at the Centre d'Art, "authenticity" in Haitian art became increasingly tied to the depiction of Vodou iconography.<sup>18</sup> While stylistically the quality

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<sup>18</sup> Carlo Avierl Célius, "La création plastique et le tournant ethnologique en Haïti," *Gradhiva* (2005), 71–94. doi:10.4000/gradhiva.301.

of the paintings remained similar, rather than promoting “popular” art on the basis of the representation of popular Haitian culture, the Centre d’Art led by Peters, pinpointed Vodou as a decisive marker of Haitian cultural authenticity and heavily promoted its role in modern Haitian aesthetics. This resulted in the increased inclusion of Vodou in the work of other Centre d’Art members as well as the development of a counter-artistic institution called the Foyer des Arts Plastiques (opening in 1950), which encouraged Haitian artists to receive formal training and experience a greater freedom of subject matter outside of Haitian daily life or Vodou.<sup>19</sup> In 1950, a large group of artists, including Lucien Price, Luckner Lazare, Max Pinchinat, Roland Dorcély, Dieudonné Cédor, Spencer Dépas, and others, decided to separate from the Center d’Art and create their own institution, Le Foyer des Arts Plastiques. The Foyer des Arts Plastiques opposed the commodification and exotification of Haitian culture and religion in the arts. However, Hyppolite’s Vodou-informed art, supported by the Centre d’Art, effectively shifted the interests and practices of the modern Haitian art community.

In 1945, the founder of surrealism, André Breton, visited Haiti with his wife as well as his friend, the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam. It was during this trip that Breton first encountered Hyppolite’s work. When discussing seeing Hyppolite’s art for the first time, Breton recounts, “the picture which brought me to a halt as I was walking past pervaded me as though it were the first exhilarating breath of spring. Even before I had become conscious of its subject matter it struck me immediately as possessing the pure gift of happiness.”<sup>20</sup> (Figure 2) Breton spent the

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<sup>19</sup> Marta Dansie and Abigail Lapin Dardashti, “Notes from the Archive: MoMA and the Internationalization of Haitian Painting, 1942-1948,” MoMA, January 3, 2018, <https://post.moma.org/notes-from-the-archive-moma-and-the-internationalization-of-haitian-painting-1942-1948/>.

<sup>20</sup> See figure 2 for the image described by Breton here.

rest of the day viewing other works by Hyppolite and concluded, “they all carried the stamp of total authenticity, and were the only ones to convey the unmistakable impression that the artist who had created them had an important message to communicate, that he was the guardian of a secret.”<sup>21</sup>

The renown of Hyppolite was heightened when, during his trip, Breton met Hyppolite and purchased five of his paintings (Figure 3,4,5). Breton’s purchase of exactly five works is significant to the story of Western discovery of Hyppolite. According to Hyppolite, his spiritual wife, La Sirène, came to him in a dream and said a man from across the sea would visit, he would purchase five works, and from that point forward his art career would become a success.<sup>22</sup> The premonition of the purchase of exactly five work given to Hyppolite combined with Breton’s patronage made a palpable narrative of the spiritual and aesthetic connection between Hyppolite and Breton and the movements they represent. Breton had all the paintings shipped back to Paris, believing that “this will bring sorely needed fresh blood to French painting.” Years later, around the time of Hyppolite’s death in 1948, Breton continued to praise his work and penned an article about Hyppolite, which he included in his book *Surrealism and Painting* (1965) (Figure 6). Significantly, Breton kept up correspondence with Philippe Thoby-Marcelin and credited him rather than Peters with the initial discovery of Hyppolite’s work (Figure 7). In his essay for *Surrealism and Painting*, Breton states, “if I remember rightly, Hyppolite was originally discovered by the Haitian writer Philippe Thoby-Marcelin when he was accompanying

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<sup>21</sup> André Breton, “Hector Hyppolite,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston, MA: MFA Publications, a division of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2002), 308.

<sup>22</sup> Michel-Philippe Lerebours, “In Search of Hector Hyppolite,” in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 26.

Peters on a tour of the interior of the island in search of new talent. It was, I believe, the exterior decoration of a tiny rum shop that had drawn their attention to him.”<sup>23</sup>

After Hyppolite’s initiation into the Centre d’Art and Breton’s visit, his work began to garner attention locally and internationally. Rodman claims that he became a wealthy man “overnight” and, as a result, was pressured to live accordingly in a rented American-type stucco house with plumbing and purchase automobiles. However, Hyppolite considered his work a product of his environment and swiftly moved back into a “caille,” or hut-like home, in the “waterfront slums,” with no markers of elegance or luxury to separate him from his neighbors.<sup>24</sup> Instead, Hyppolite put his extra money into the purchase of a small fishing vessel, which he hired local fishermen to operate for him. Any of the fish Hyppolite and his household did not consume were then sold in the neighborhood market for a modest profit. Near the end of his life, Hyppolite expanded his business ventures further, purchasing a small marketplace that sold soft drinks.<sup>25</sup>

Hyppolite continued to live and produce paintings in the Vodou tradition for the rest of his life. According to Hyppolite, John the Baptist guided his work and La Sirène made him money. Hyppolite’s studio was situated behind the house, open to the alleyway, where he both painted and held infrequent Vodou ceremonies. Rodman describes Hyppolite’s home as being filled with Vodou iconography and *houngan* regalia: “in one corner was a great cross, dedicated to Baron Samedi and flanked with offerings of food and wine,” and in another room, “the altar is

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<sup>23</sup> André Breton, “Hector Hyppolite,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston, MA: MFA Publications, a division of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2002), 309.

<sup>24</sup> Selden Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti: Popular Painters in the Black Republic* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948), 64-65.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

piled high with painted calabashes, votive lights, rum bottles, amulets and cheap prints of the Catholic saints, in the exact center of which stands a small, framed, academic portrait on glass, of the artist himself. To one side hang Hyppolite's ceremonial robes and flags, to the other, on a chair and under gauze, are two dressed-up puppets representing the *loa* of the sea, flanked by a gold crown heavily encrusted with glass-cut jewels, and the detached headlamp of an abandoned car."<sup>26</sup> Next to the house is said to have sat a large, incomplete sailing vessel, which Hyppolite hoped to restore and use to deepen his connection to La Sirène, to whom he dedicated much of his final years. In an interview with American journalist Edith Efron, Hyppolite explained that while he usually kept seven mistresses at any given time, he now only maintained three, as women had begun to "disgust" him and he was always in love with his mystic wife.<sup>27</sup>

In 1947, Hyppolite's international career and attention began to reach new heights. Starting on January 23, 1947, Hyppolite's work was shown at an international painting exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris put on by UNESCO. Here his painting *Une prostituée* (1946) caught the attention of surrealists Philippe Soupault and Pierre Mabille (Figure 8).<sup>28</sup> The years 1947-1949 saw Hyppolite's work in shows around the world, including New York, London, Washington D.C., and more in Paris. Breton remained an advocate for Hyppolite's work, presenting it at an international exhibition of surrealism in September 1947 and lamenting in a letter to Thoby-Marcelin about Hyppolite's upcoming absence from a surrealist exhibition in Berlin.<sup>29</sup> Hyppolite stayed in personal contact with Breton and in 1948

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>28</sup> *Hector Hyppolite, 1891?-1948*, Paris: Éditions de Capri / Comité Hector Hyppolite, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 12.

sent him a personalized New Year card that included three watercolor paintings by Hyppolite. One painting depicts two homes in a countryside setting; another shows a boat at sea manned by potentially Hyppolite himself, perhaps in reference to the one being built for Hyppolite to join his spiritual wife, La Sirène; and finally, the third represents a bouquet of red and blue flowers. He signs the card “Happy New Year 1948 to André Breton” (Figure 9).

Unfortunately, Hyppolite’s career was cut short when he died of a heart attack on June 9, 1948, at the age of 54 (Figure 10).<sup>30</sup> The artist was honored by Haitian President Dumarsais Estimé with a posthumous Gold Medal and remained an influential figure for the next generation of Centre d’Art and Port-au-Prince artists. However, his work was largely forgotten internationally, with limited exhibitions from 1952 to 2008 in Mexico, Cuba, the United States, Paris, and Haiti. In 2008, the Haitian Art Society launched a twelve-month celebration called “The Year of Hyppolite,” hoping to honor and remember Hyppolite as well as his lasting impact on Haitian art. While many of the activities planned to take place in Haiti had to be canceled due to the disasters of 2008, this effort demonstrates the significance Hyppolite still holds in the Haitian art world today. Haitian senator and art collector Rudolph H. Boulos spoke about Hyppolite’s importance to Haitian art and heritage during the “Year of Hyppolite” festivities, saying, “it took me nearly half a century but, in the end, I repatriated about twenty paintings from American collections,” and repeatedly emphasized Hyppolite’s legacy to Haitian art as well as his fidelity to the country, saying he was “true to himself and to Haiti.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Senator Rudolph H. Boulos, “Honoring Hector Hyppolite,” in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 86.

## IV. Hyppolite in the Caribbean Context

### Vodou Suppression and Revival in Haiti: The Conditions of Hyppolite's Artistic

#### Production

One of the most significant aspects of Hyppolite's identity and artistic production was his deep Vodou faith and role as a *houngan* in his community. Vodou is a diasporic religion originating in Haiti that blends West African religious traditions with Catholicism. Vodou doctrine recognizes the divinity of the creator, Bondye, under whom are the *loas* (spirits). Practitioners of Vodou venerate the *loas* in an *ounfò* (temple), which is run by a *houngan* (priest) or *mambo* (priestess). Much of the terminology of Vodou (sometimes also Vodoun, Vodoo, Voodoo, Vòdoun, or Vaudou) comes from the Fon language of West Africa, including the word Vodou itself, which means "spirit" or "deity." Vodou has been practiced in Haiti (then Saint Domingue) since the sixteenth century, when it was first developed as a syncretic religion by oppressed enslaved individuals to reject "the religious and political domination of their colonial oppressors."<sup>32</sup> The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Saint Domingue saw a nativistic movement that aimed to synthesize Western and Central African spiritual traditions along with French colonially enforced Roman Catholicism in order to cultivate a uniquely Haitian culture and religion. Individuals experiencing colonialism aimed to galvanize Vodou to achieve political, religious, and cultural freedom from France.<sup>33</sup> According to Michel S. Laguerre, a social anthropologist, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, any regional differences throughout Saint Domingue that had previously existed in Vodou "disappeared by the time of the

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<sup>32</sup> Michel S. Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1989), 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Haitian Revolution,” resulting in the Vodou practiced by Hyppolite in the twentieth century. This development also allowed for Vodou to “become a cohesive political factor for revolutionary slaves.”<sup>34</sup> Linguist Benjamin Hebblethwaite echoes this sentiment, arguing that this “new Vodou,” which reconciled both Dahomey-based Vodun religious traditions, other forms of African animism, and Roman Catholicism, inspired “like-minded Africans and Creoles... to resist slavery, forge Haitian independence and keep traditions alive.”<sup>35</sup> However, by the end of the 1700’s, slave owners and colonial authorities of Saint Domingue became increasingly fearful that the practices of enslaved people were progressing from “superstitions and fetishes” to something more powerful, “sacrilegious,” and “poisoning.” Slave owners and colonial authorities worried about Vodou’s potential to be weaponized by revolutionaries seeking to kill those in positions of power for the crimes of slavery.<sup>36</sup>

This fear came to fruition on the night of August 14, 1791, in Bois-Caïman (Bwa Kayiman), when an impressive meeting of the enslaved individuals of the region was called. The meeting was presided over by Dutty Boukman, an influential local enslaved man, and Cécile Fatiman, a Vodou mambo. During the meeting, Boukman called for an immediate revolt of those enslaved, outlined reasons why other such revolts had failed, and explained how their revolt would avoid these follies. Afterwards, the priestess called on the Vodou spirits, *loas*, for protection and guidance. It is said that during the priestess’s possession by the *loas*, an agreement was made between those enslaved and the *loas*. If the Vodouists agreed to continue

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou: Rasin Figuièr, Rasin BWA Kayiman, and the Rada and Gede Rites* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 20.

the “old African practices” and venerate the *loas* after the revolt, then they would not only “increase their forces tenfold but also cover their enemies with all sorts of curses.”<sup>37</sup> Other iterations of the events claim that Boukman himself was the priest, not Fatiman, and include the ritual sacrifice of an entirely black pig to gain the favor of the *loas*.<sup>38</sup> Regardless, this meeting is credited as the inspiration for the start of the Haitian Revolution. Immediately after this meeting, those in attendance began to burn the homes of and kill the colonists, sparking the formal beginning of the revolution.<sup>39</sup> It remains contested by scholars if the leader of the revolution, Toussaint Louverture, and his ally and the first Haitian emperor, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, were Vodouists themselves. However, the significance of the Bois-Caïman meeting illustrates Vodou’s revolutionary power and solidified its role in the formation of a Haitian national identity. The interwoven relationship of Vodou and Haitian nationalism remains a key feature in the reception of Hyppolite’s work, which can be traced to this instance of the forging of this connection between the two in the Haitian cultural psyche at Bois-Caïman in 1791.

After the success of the Haitian Revolution, which resulted in Haiti being given its political independence from France and freedom to those enduring enslavement, there were two main social classes left in Haiti: the “*Affranchi*” and the newly freed, formerly enslaved. The *affranchis* referred to individuals who had either purchased their freedom while under colonial rule, the mixed-race descendants of Euro-Christian masters and enslaved African women, or had received a formal education during colonial rule. While the *affranchis* had been a subgroup

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<sup>37</sup> Michel S. Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1989), 61.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou: Rasin Figuièr, Rasin BWA Kayiman, and the Rada and Gede Rites* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 25.

<sup>39</sup> Michel S. Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1989), 63.

under colonial rule, they were elevated to elite status after independence.<sup>40</sup> This meant that those individuals who had just recently gained freedom but who lacked formal education as a result of colonial oppression were once again relegated to the lower class of society, perpetuating an economic class divide associated with the practice of Vodou still reflected in Hyppolite's early life and career. Additionally, the *affranchis* were fearful of this transition because, by nature of their previous circumstances and education, they were "alienated from their African roots," aligning themselves ideologically with the West. Furthermore, they had just witnessed the revolutionary political power of Vodou and were fearful it would be employed again to oust them from their new position of power in Haitian society.<sup>41</sup> The assassination of the first Haitian Emperor, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, on October 17, 1806, in Pont Rouge, a neighboring city of the capital, Port-au-Prince, exemplified this. He was a known Vodou sympathizer and possibly himself a practitioner. Two *affranchi* in Dessalines's cabinet murdered him shortly after his rise to power. This marked the transition from Vodou as a part of Haiti's "national essence" to being considered "detrimental to tranquility."<sup>42</sup>

Dessalines's death spurred a governmental transition away from the acceptance of Vodou because of its "primitive" and revolutionary qualities, a trend that continued throughout the following centuries of Haitian history. After Dessalines died in 1806, his successor, Henri Christophe, banned the use of his name and Vodou practices in Haiti. Although there are rumors of his potential illicit practice of Vodou, genuine or staged, which would be leaked to the general

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<sup>40</sup> Margaret Mitchell Armand, *Healing in the Homeland: Haïtian Vodou Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 3-4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 4-5.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou: Rasin Figuier, Rasin BWA Kayiman, and the Rada and Gede Rites* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 26.

public in order to garner Vodouists' support while maintaining social control, this offers a possible explanation as to why Christophe later becomes a figure painted by Hyppolite.

Christophe's policy on the suppression of Vodou was continued by leaders of Haiti until 1847, when Faustin-Élie Soulouque was named the president and emperor of Haiti. Soulouque's rule marked a period in which "Vodou culture flourished." Soulouque openly practiced Vodou himself and encouraged its destigmatization through public observance (Figure 11). This allowed for a brief period of Vodou acceptance in Haiti. However, after Soulouque's presidency ended in 1859, the reception of Vodou once again took a negative turn. In 1864, the Bizoton Affair occurred. The Bizoton Affair took place as a result of prominent Haitian newspapers and British chargé d'affaires Sir Spenser St. John accusing a group of Vodou practitioners of cannibalizing children. The accused Vodouists were tortured to confess and executed. From this moment on, Vodou was once again demonized by the elites, who claimed it to be a representation of "slavery and barbarity" in Haiti.<sup>43</sup> The affair received much attention throughout Haiti and resulted in anti-Vodou policies under succeeding presidents. However, the practice of Vodou was never entirely dismantled. Despite the continued clandestine practice of Vodou throughout Haiti, it would never reach a level of open celebration like that experienced under Soulouque again. Vodou remained associated with members of the lower class or those in marginalized positions in society. For the elites, it continued to represent an uneducated "fetishistic stage" of religion that opposed rational enlightenment thinking, scientific reasoning, and the Christian values they

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 26-27.

supported.<sup>44</sup> These sentiments from the societal elite in Haiti and the political policy put forth after the Bizoton Affair remained in place throughout Hyppolite's lifetime.

However, the late 1920s-early 1930s saw a revitalized interest from scholars both inside and outside of Haiti in Vodou. Both of these groups were largely inspired by the U.S. occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934. The first scholar to write a seminal piece on Haitian Vodou was Haitian doctor, politician, writer, and ethnographer Jean Price-Mars. Price-Mars was from a wealthy Haitian family, with a Protestant father and a Catholic mother. In 1899, Price-Mars received a scholarship from the Haitian government to study medicine in Paris. While there, he also studied social sciences and humanities, where he was schooled in European modern thought on anthropology, ethnography, and sociology.<sup>45</sup> During the first few years of the US occupation, Price-Mars was in Paris serving as a chargé d'affaires. While in France, whether as a student or as a diplomat, Price-Mars had the opportunity to pursue an education in the humanities and social sciences and engage with Black intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, which strengthened his beliefs in the decolonization of anthropological knowledge and the position of Vodou and folklore as the bedrock of Haitian culture. Upon his return in the 1920s, Price-Mars became known for his activism and scholarship centered on "the rehabilitation of the black race" as well as "launching a cultural nationalism and an anti-imperial movement against the brutal American military forces in Haiti."<sup>46</sup> Price-Mars was championed by the *Négritude* movement, which was a cultural, political, and literary movement aimed at raising a

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>45</sup> Celucien L. Joseph, "The Role of Vodou in the Religious Philosophy of Jean Price-Mars," in *Vodou in Haitian Memory: The Idea and Representation of Vodou in Haitian Imagination* (Lexington Books, 2016), 35.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 33.

“Black consciousness,” and personally advocated for the embracement of the “African roots” of Haitian society, including Vodou’s recognition as a religion in its own right.

Price-Mars’s seminal book *Ainsi Parla l’Oncle (So Spoke the Uncle)*, published in 1928, discusses the nature and origins of Haitian identity with a particular emphasis on the religion of Vodou. In the introduction, Price-Mars states that the text hopes to integrate popular Haitian thought into the discipline of traditional ethnography and aims to restore “the value of Haitian folklore in the eyes of the people.” However, Price-Mars never practiced Vodou personally and clarifies that his interest in Vodou does not lie with the religion itself but rather with the “sciences that make it up.”<sup>47</sup> According to Price-Mars, Haiti has developed its own unique culture through the blending of African and European civilizations, highlighted by the practice of Vodou.

First, Price-Mars outlines the retention of African animism in Vodou as well as the transformations by Roman Catholicism, a development that can be viewed aesthetically in Hyppolite's works. He sees this symbiosis as natural in any cultural practice or society. Second, he explains how elements of each religion have influenced Haitian cultural practices. For example, the continuation of social structures and veneration of ancestors is found in the African influences of Vodou and celebrations (feast days) in partnership with the veneration of Catholic saints.<sup>48</sup> Through this, Price-Mars hopes to both position Vodou as a legitimate religion, deserving the same prestige as religions such as Roman Catholicism. He also provides proof for

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<sup>47</sup> Jean Price-Mars and Magdaline W. Shannon, *So Spoke the Uncle = Ainsi Parla L’Oncle*, (Washington, D.C: Three Continents Press, 1983), 7.

<sup>48</sup> Celucien L. Joseph, “The Role of Vodou in the Religious Philosophy of Jean Price-Mars,” in *Vodou in Haitian Memory: The Idea and Representation of Vodou in Haitian Imagination* (Lexington Books, 2016), 39-40.

the distinctiveness of Haitian folklore and cultural practices. Finally, Price-Mars advocates for the liberating potential, the power of social transformation, and the reversal of colonial order caused by the practice of Vodou in Haiti. He sees the Vodou beliefs of the revolutionaries as “the leaven of the revolt against odious oppression.”<sup>49</sup> Despite his defense of and praise for Vodou, Price-Mars did not claim Vodou to be the only or “true” religion in Haiti and discusses the experiences of other Haitians who practice varying Christian denominations as well. Additionally, Price-Mars states that the majority of Vodou practitioners are Haitian peasants, which has been read by scholars as a reinforcement of elitist stereotypes surrounding Vodou.<sup>50</sup> Price-Mars did significant work in the understanding and appreciation of Vodou within Haiti as an influential religion and social practice. His work created the conditions from which a Haitian revival and Western interest in Vodou flourished, contributing to Hyppolite’s success in both spheres. In the ensuing decades, Hyppolite’s paintings were perceived by his critics as an aesthetic evidence for Price-Mars’s notion of the uniquely Haitian, syncretic, and socially liberating qualities of Vodou. Around the same time that Jean Price-Mars was writing *So Spoke the Uncle*, American journalist and writer William Seabrook was writing his influential book on Haitian Vodou, *The Magic Island* (1929). Seabrook presented the book as an ethnographic account of what he had witnessed and learned about Vodou during a trip he had taken to the island. In order to bolster the “authenticity” and truthfulness of the work, Seabrook included extensive author notes at the end of the book for each chapter, including photographs he took himself, further elaboration on places and people, the scores of music described in the work, references to texts that corroborate his stories, and more. The first section of the book describes

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 37.

in detail various Vodou rites he was permitted to witness through his servant during his stay, Louis. The second section is about the “black sorcery” he learned of and includes one of the book’s most famous chapters, a chapter dedicated to zombies. The third and fourth sections are a collection of other differing, generalized tales of Haitian peasant life and cultural practices. Seabrook's book became a bestseller, particularly among Americans who did not have access to many English-language sources on Vodou and were interested in the topic as a result of the U.S. occupation. *The Magic Island* has since been discredited by scholars for its exoticification of the citizens and religion of Haiti through both the accounts and the illustrations (Figure 12). Seabrook’s descriptions and illustrations, which were used as the aesthetic blueprint for the “zombie” in American pop culture, compared to Hyppolite’s painting of zombies, present highly racialized and dehumanized individuals. Seabrook’s illustrations highlight large lips, elongated skulls, and skeletal figures. By contrast, the zombified individuals in Hyppolite’s paintings do not present any noticeably different physical characteristics compared to those who belong to the land of the living (Figure 13).<sup>51</sup>

Western audiences were not Seabrook’s only readers; many Haitian scholars and intellectuals took an interest as well. One of Seabrook’s readers was Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, the writer credited with introducing Hyppolite to Peters. In the introduction to his own book on the topic of Vodou in Haiti, *The Beast of the Haitian Hills* (1946), Thoby-Marcelin credits

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<sup>51</sup> Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* is most frequently discussed as a launching pad for racist and exoticizing concepts of Vodou in the field of cinema studies. Media Studies scholar Emiel Martens refers to Tim Lanzendörfer’s acknowledgment of *The Magic Island* as “the origin of Western interest in the zombie” and outlines the rise of “zombie films” in Hollywood as a direct result of this raised interest. These films include *White Zombie* (1932), which Martens argues relies directly on Seabrook’s presentation of the zombie and Haitian practitioners of Vodou as “blood-maddened, sex-maddened, and god-maddened.” Emiel Martens, “The 1930s Horror Adventure Film on Location in Jamaica: ‘Jungle Gods’, ‘Voodoo Drums’ and ‘Mumbo Jumbo’ in the ‘Secret Places of Paradise Island.’” *Humanities (Basel)* 10, no. 2 (2021): 62, doi:10.3390/h10020062.

Seabrook with having changed his opinion of Vodou, a change that would later develop into Thoby-Marcelin's talent-scouting of Vodou artists, including Hyppolite, for the Centre d'Art and his promotion of Vodou aesthetics. Thoby-Marcelin recalls, when he read *The Magic Island* in 1932, his thinking shifted as "until then, like all the people of the bourgeois milieu to which I belonged, I considered the *Vodoun* cult a body of superstitious practices, grotesque as well as dangerous..." but Seabrook's book proved that Vodou "constituted a rich mine of material in which humor and fantasy blended with pathos and poetry, and by showing me the excellent use I could make of it in the literary field." Similarly to Seabrook, Thoby-Marcelin also aimed to base his narrative on lived experiences and was compelled to "go down among the people, in order to see their life close up."<sup>52</sup> After some initial struggle to gain acceptance in Vodou communities, within three years, he claims to have become "intimate with its practices."<sup>53</sup> As a result, believing himself to have enough material for a novel, he contacted his brother, Pierre, and they began the process of producing *The Beast of the Haitian Hills*.<sup>54</sup>

The book itself is a fictional tale of a well-off Haitian man whose wife suddenly dies, inspiring him to move to the countryside, where he becomes acquainted with the life of the peasantry as well as Vodou. Throughout the story, multiple characters are possessed by the evil spirit "Cigouave," resulting in sexual violence, physical harm, and death. While Thoby-Marcelin claims to have altered his preconceived notions of violence and the frightfulness surrounding Vodou's practices, his work only seems to affirm these stereotypes. Thoby-Marcelin, as alluded

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<sup>52</sup> Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, Pierre Marcelin, and Peter C. Rhodes, *The Beast of the Haitian Hills* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), xv.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, xvi.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, xvii.

to by his statement in the book's introduction of "the excellent use" he could make of Vodou in the literary field, sees the value of Vodou in its usefulness as inspiration for his own literary practices. Both Seabrook and Thoby-Marcelin end up reinforcing many Vodou stereotypes through their exotification and sensationalization of Vodou, despite their proposed efforts of using ethnographic research to dispel such stigmas. Additionally, while both Price-Mars and Thoby-Marcelin come from similar backgrounds and aim to elevate the understanding of Vodou, only Price-Mars advocates for the potential political power of Vodou as a nationalist folklore, whereas Thoby-Marcelin's appreciation of Vodou does not appear to extend outside of the realm of folkloric inspiration for contemporary Haitian art, as in Hyppolite's paintings.

This cultural appreciation of Vodou is a significant shift from past discourse, particularly in light of the contrasting political situation of Vodou at the time in Haiti. As a result of the U.S. occupation and out of fear of inciting "religious prejudices, colonialist attitudes, and other resentments" from Western powers in regard to the continued practice of Vodou, Haitian presidents of the early twentieth century were increasingly anti-Vodou.<sup>55</sup> This in turn emboldened the "white Roman Catholic churchmen" in Haiti to begin fervently preaching against Vodou. Many churches even started to require churchgoers to take an "anti-superstition oath." After the oath was taken, individuals would be provided with a physical card that they must present to receive services such as communion and marriage rites.<sup>56</sup> In 1941, under the support and protection of Haiti's president, Élie Lescot, several Catholic leaders initiated the

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<sup>55</sup> Benjamin Hebblethwaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou: Rasin Figuier, Rasin BWA Kayiman, and the Rada and Gede Rites* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 28.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

start of Opération Nettoyage (Operation Cleanup).<sup>57</sup> This “operation” aimed to “sweep all ancestral traditions from the country.” The low-class citizens, largely Vodouists, reacted violently to this campaign, and in 1942, President Lescot, in fear of losing political favor, was forced to abandon the project and call for its end.<sup>58</sup> However, this was not before damage had been done both physically to Vodou sites and to the reputation of Vodouists, resulting in Vodou increasingly being practiced in secret or privately within rural, low-income communities.

The political suppression of Vodou in Haiti in the 1940’s in particular, made Hyppolite’s art potentially contentious and subversive. However, Vodou ceremonies were still practiced throughout Haiti at this time and were even officially permitted in cases where visiting foreign researchers and tourists wished to attend them.<sup>59</sup> This offers a potential explanation as to why Hyppolite’s art was permitted to be promoted and sold at the patronage of Dewitt Peters, an American with a largely foreign clientele base. In addition to the continued illicit ceremonies often held within local *houngans’* homes, a practice Hyppolite appears to have engaged in himself with his *houngan* robes proudly displayed in his home, a room dedicated to a Vodou altar, and his statement of his self-identification as a *houngan* within the community.<sup>60</sup> Hyppolite was able to successfully navigate the continued practice of his Vodou faith through the support

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<sup>57</sup> Kate Ramsey, a historian and anthropologist whose work focuses on the Caribbean, particularly Haiti, in her article “Prohibition, Persecution, Performance: Anthropology and the Penalization of Vodou in Mid-20th-Century,” outlines in detail the practices of the Lescot government and Catholic Church to suppress Vodou during Opération Nettoyage as well as the ramifications for both anthropologists and Vodouists.

Kate Ramsey, “Prohibition, Persecution, Performance: Anthropology and the Penalization of Vodou in Mid-20th-Century,” *Gradhiva* 1, no.1 (2005): 165–79, doi:10.4000/gradhiva.352.

<sup>58</sup> Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997), 10.

<sup>59</sup> Kate Ramsey, “Prohibition, Persecution, Performance: Anthropology and the Penalization of Vodou in Mid-20th-Century,” *Gradhiva* 1, no. 1 (2005): 166, doi:10.4000/gradhiva.352.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 167-8.

of foreign individuals like Peters and illicit at-home practices, which remained largely overlooked by government officials.

### **Hyppolite as the “Grand Maître” of Haitian Art**

Thoby-Marcelin was interested not only in Vodou’s modern literary influences but also in modern Haitian aesthetic practices engaging with Vodou as well. In 1944, when Thoby-Marcelin or his friend and collaborator, the founder of the Centre d’Art, Dewitt Peters, invited Hyppolite to join the Centre d’Art, they had begun their agenda of constructing the Centre d’Art as a place of promotion for Haitian self-taught artists and aimed to include those who depicted Vodou iconography. While Hyppolite was a leading figure in terms of the representation of Vodou in modern art, there were other artists at the Centre d’Art who also included Vodou within their works, including Rigaud Benoit, who was Hyppolite’s son-in-law, as well as Wilson Bigaud and Préfète Duffaut, who both worked with and were inspired by Hyppolite.

One such work by Hyppolite demonstrates the significance of Vodou in the legacy of the Haitian Revolution, nearly 150 years after its end. The painting entitled *Henri Christophe Calling the Spirits* (1946-47) depicts the Haitian revolutionary, a comrade of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and eventually King of Haiti (Figure 14). He is likely using an *asson* to call upon the *loas*. An *asson* is a sacred rattle, which is used to summon *loas* and given to *houngans* by Papa Loko (the *loa* considered to be the first priest and the guardian of ritual form and procedure) in a ceremony conferring their status as a senior Vodou practitioner. Christophe holds the *asson* poised for use in his left hand, which is extended across his body. Christophe is depicted in a fine, European-styled military uniform, including a feathered bicorn hat, a white undershirt, and a brown and green tinted jacket and pants. A green uniform often indicated members of the

infantry who worked directly under the king or leader during the Haitian Revolution. He looks directly toward the viewer with a tense, serious gaze, which, paired with his uniform, implies that Christophe is calling the spirit in a time of need during the battles of the Haitian Revolution. Christophe is depicted in an outdoor setting, with two flowering trees behind him and seven red and white flowering bushes surrounding where he stands. A reference to the *loas*, who are believed to inhabit trees, rocks, streams, and other lush nature settings.<sup>61</sup> Christophe's surrounding vegetation grounds him in the realm of the *loas* upon whom he is calling. This work emphasizes not only Hyppolite's own personal belief system but also the significance of Vodou in Haitian cultural memory as a champion of the revolution.

Another example of Hyppolite's depiction of Vodou is his painting titled *Ogou Feray* (1945) (Figure 15). Ogou Feray, an important *loa* associated with warfare, blacksmithing, and wisdom, is represented on the right side of the Masonite canvas. He is identifiable through his red military clothing, as red is his associated color. Ogou Feray is also often connected to Saint James the Great/Saint James the Moor Slayer. Saint James is frequently depicted in armor raising a sword to slay his foe. Due to Saint James' veneration in Catholic tradition as a protector of Christianity, he was a popular figure in Spanish American colonies, of which Haiti was part until 1697, when it was ceded to the French. Ogou Feray likely became syncretized with Saint James both as a method for Vodouists to continue to venerate the *loas* publicly despite colonially enforced conversions to Catholicism and because of their shared associations with warfare and religious protection.

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<sup>61</sup> Gerald Alexis, "The Indigenous Styles of Haitian Art: Decoding Hector Hyppolite & Saint Soleil," Art Talk series virtual lecture, October 28, 2021, posted November 8, 2021, by the Haitian Art society, YouTube, 1:19:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16It1fFoc88>.

In Hyppolite's *Ogou Feray*, the *loa* continues to bear a resemblance to Saint James through his military uniform and wielding of various weapons. Additionally, Ogou Feray is surrounded by various, seemingly floating objects, including cups, vases, crosses, and playing cards, with a small red table in front of him. The table and objects allude to an altar with various offerings made to the *loa*. The snake that seems to float over the table is a potential reference to Damballah Wédo a high-ranking deity in the Vodou pantheon. Damballah Wédo is a serpent god who is often depicted with the body of a snake and the head or upper chest of a human, which Hyppolite also depicted on occasion (Figures 16, 17) Vodou and the *loas* were a guiding force in Hyppolite's life and feature dominantly in his artistic practices.

While some scholars accuse Hyppolite of largely producing Vodou-inspired paintings to cater to American and European audiences' fetishistic interest in Vodou, it was undeniably important to Hyppolite, as noted by his open veneration of the religion and his colleagues. Dr. Michel-Philippe Lerebours heralds Hyppolite as someone who "bravely withstood prejudice against his faith at a time when Vodoo practitioners did not talk about it in public."<sup>62</sup> Additionally, Hyppolite's fellow Centre d'Art painter Marie-José Nadal recalls Hyppolite calling her "my little mermaid," an allusion to *La Sirène*, and explaining Vodou rituals to her, which "in those days was considered quite daring."<sup>63</sup> Hyppolite was not only committed to his faith ritualistically and socially but also artistically.

Hyppolite's open veneration of Vodou not only interested buyers and surprised colleagues but also impressed others in the Haitian modern art community. According to art

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<sup>62</sup> Michel-Philippe Lerebours, "In Search of Hector Hyppolite," in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 27.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

historians Marta Dansie and Abigail Lapin Dardashti, Peters and other leading members of the Centre d'Art pushed artists working to create "primitive art," which frequently caused friction between the Centre d'Art and other local artists and art collectives such as Foyer des Arts Plastiques. This friction is epitomized by the creation of the Foyer des Arts Plastiques in 1950. The Foyer sought to offer artists the same studio and exhibition space, but with greater freedom in terms of training and experimentation, including media traditionally associated with high art such as painting and sculpture as well as jewelry, ceramics, woodworking, textiles, and basketry. Art historians Dansie and Dardashti argue that the Foyer "embraced the works of artists from throughout Haiti, and, unlike the Centre, it did not privilege painting or Vodou imagery, seeking instead to give artists wider berth to create freely without insisting on the 'primitive' aesthetics or subjects that were appealing to foreigners."<sup>64</sup> However, despite this tension between the Centre d'Art and the Foyer, even artists associated with the Foyer were "sincere and reverent towards Hyppolite." One of the leading artists of the Foyer, Max Pinchinat, praised Hyppolite: "Hector Hyppolite is the master. Nobody in Haiti doubts that!... We love his palette... We muse in appreciation of his lyricism, not his idiosyncrasy. Especially to us, Haitian painters, Hector Hyppolite wanted to hand down his lessons...."<sup>65</sup> As a result of Hyppolite's widespread appreciation by his colleagues in the Haitian modern art community and his close association with Vodou, he was often given the nickname of "Grand Maître." Grand Maître is another name

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<sup>64</sup> Marta Dansie and Abigail Lapin Dardashti, "Notes from the Archive: MoMA and the Internationalization of Haitian Painting, 1942-1948," MoMA, January 3, 2018, <https://post.moma.org/notes-from-the-archive-moma-and-the-internationalization-of-haitian-painting-1942-1948/>.

<sup>65</sup> Michel-Philippe Lerebours, "In Search of Hector Hyppolite," in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 26-27.

used to refer to Bondye, the supreme god in Haitian Vodou, making it a fitting nickname for the *houngan* who had become the supreme god of Haitian modern art.

### **Hyppolite as an Embodiment of the Négritude Movement**

Hyppolite's work reflected a broader Haitian cultural revival exemplified by the appreciation of his Vodou-themed work by diverse artists and intellectuals. This promotion of Vodou was part of a larger movement in the Caribbean, titled the *Négritude* movement. The *Négritude* movement was founded after the *Indigénisme* movement in Haiti, which was formed in response to the U.S. invasion of Haiti on July 28, 1915. President Woodrow Wilson claimed that this was an effort to restore order and stability after the assassination of Haitian President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam. The years following the invasion resulted in three important new developments in Haiti: first, three new presidents selected by the U.S. Senate; second, U.S. rule as a military regime through martial law; and third, the establishment of a *corvée* system of forced labor.<sup>66</sup> Fearing the increased oppression of Haitian people and culture as a result of the occupation, the *Indigénisme* movement aimed to socially, culturally, and politically dismantle imperialism and colonial racism in Haiti against Black and Indigenous/Taino peoples through the recognition of a uniquely Haitian identity.

The writings of Jean Price-Mars paved the way for the positive evaluation of the history of Africa, Vodou, African myths, and Haitian popular culture within Haiti. At the same time, he questioned the imported values and culture from the hegemonic West that had developed a

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<sup>66</sup> A *corvée* system is a form of unpaid labor that is intermittent in nature and lasts for limited periods of time. It is typically enforced by the state in lieu of taxes and in order to support public building and infrastructure projects.

cultural dualism in Haiti.<sup>67</sup> The *Indigénisme* movement relied heavily on Jean Price-Mars's works such as *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle (So Spoke the Uncle)* (1928) and *Formation ethnique, folklore et culture du peuple haïtien* (1939) in which he illustrates the connection culturally between Africa and Haiti and celebrates the African roots of Haitian culture, including Vodou. Additionally, Price-Mars accuses the Haitian elite of being afflicted by "collective bovarysme," a phrase borrowed from the philosopher Jules de Gaultier's studies of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1857). Price-Mars likens the novel's main character Emma Bovary's denial of her humble realities in favor of a life of delusion, lies, and fantasy to the condition of the Haitian elite. He argues that the elites have, since the revolution, aligned and identified themselves with France to distance themselves from Africa and the stain of slavery.<sup>68</sup> Price-Mars recognized the dangers of the marginalization of Haitian people as a result of the U.S. occupation and of the elites' turning their backs on their African heritage. As a result, he sought to construct a uniquely Haitian identity based on local values and African roots.

Later in the 1930s, francophone Black intellectuals expanded upon these ideas and formed the *Négritude* movement. *Négritude*—which translates to "Blackness"—was a cultural, political, and literary movement that aimed at raising a "Black consciousness" across Africa and its diaspora. Three of *Négritude*'s founders and most influential figures were Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, Senegalese politician and cultural theorist Léopold Sédar Senghor, and French Guinean poet Léon-Gontran Damas. For each of these thinkers, Haiti served an important role

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<sup>67</sup> Frantz Rousseau Déus, "The Construction of Identity in Haitian Indigenism and the Post-Colonial Debate," *Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology* 17 (2020), doi:10.1590/1809-43412020v17d511.

<sup>68</sup> Jean Price-Mars, *Formation ethnique folklore et culture du peuple haïtien* (Chicoutimi: J.-M. Tremblay, 2010): 111, doi:10.1522/030174843.

because of what scholar of Francophone Caribbean literature Martin Munro terms the Haitian Revolution's "big bang" effect.<sup>69</sup> The aftereffects of the Haitian Revolution, Munro argues, "shaped the 'great black cry,' which emanated almost a century and a half later from the voices of Senghor, Césaire, and Damas in the *Négritude* movement.

References to Haiti and Haiti's vital role in *Négritude* philosophy can be found in each of the leading figures of the movement's works. Senghor, for example, in his poem "Prière de paix" ("Prayer for Peace") (1948), proclaims Haiti the symbolic heart of the colonized, pan-African world.<sup>70</sup> While Senghor acknowledges Haiti's importance as a symbol of successful anticolonial revolt, his work remains largely centered on Africa. Haiti figures more prominently in Damas and Césaire's work. Damas declares Price-Mars as "the father of Haitianism" and views him as the twentieth-century inheritor of the revolutionary legacy.<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, Césaire most explicitly evokes the memory of the Haitian Revolution in his poetry, plays, and essays. Of the three, Césaire appears to most acutely feel the sense of alienation and deracination from the legacies of slavery and colonialism in his home country of Martinique. He often proposes the reason for Martinique's suffering is because it has yet to experience a revolution like Haiti: "Ce pays souffre d'une révolution refoulée. On nous a volé notre révolution" (This country suffers from a repressed revolution. Our revolution has been stolen from us.)<sup>72</sup> In one of Césaire's most famous

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<sup>69</sup> Martin Munro, "Can't Stand up for Falling Down: Haiti, Its Revolutions, and Twentieth-Century Negritudes," *Research in African Literatures* 35, no. 2 (2004): 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3821341>.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Passage from the poem "Panorama" from *Tropiques no. 1* in Martin Munro's, "Can't Stand up for Falling down: Haiti, Its Revolutions, and Twentieth-Century Negritudes," *Research in African Literatures* 35, no. 2 (2004):7-8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3821341>.

works, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land)* (1939), he frequently aligns himself with Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture.

“What is mine

a lone man imprisoned by whiteness

a lone man defying the white screams of a white death

(Toussaint, Toussaint Louverture)”<sup>73</sup>

While Césaire certainly aligns with Louverture racially, in presenting Louverture as an isolated, defiant figure surrounded by the deadening effects of “whiteness,” Césaire is also identifying personally with Louverture, comparing his experience as an alienated Martinican.<sup>74</sup> As a result of the work of modern Haitian thinkers such as Price-Mars and Haiti’s successful revolution against a colonial power, leaders of the *Négritude* movement position Haiti with particular prominence and veneration in their work.

Aimé Césaire was arguably the most prominent figure of the *Négritude* movement in the Francophone Caribbean. He was born in 1913 to middle-class Black parents. During his childhood, his parents moved the family to the capital of Martinique, Fort-de-France, so that he could attend the only secondary school on the island. Césaire was awarded an educational scholarship and traveled to Paris to attend Lycée Louis-le-Grand. In Paris, he passed the entrance exams for the École normale supérieure. While at the École normale supérieure, he created the

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<sup>73</sup> Aimé Césaire, *The Original 1939 Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Albert James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 21.

<sup>74</sup> Martin Munro, “Can’t Stand up for Falling down: Haiti, Its Revolutions, and Twentieth-Century Négritudes,” *Research in African Literatures* 35, no. 2 (2004): 8-9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3821341>.

literary review *L'Étudiant noir* with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon-Gontran Damas in 1935.

In Césaire's view, colonial society had been impeded from developing its own cultural forms and institutions through the imposition of French culture upon the populations transported from Africa. As a result, his work and poems posit the ideal of *Négritude*, in which old behaviors are overthrown and a new Black community can emerge.<sup>75</sup>

In 1939, Césaire moved back to Martinique with his wife, Suzanne Césaire, and their young son. In the Caribbean, one of Césaire's most notable accomplishments was the literary review *Tropiques*. Aimé and Suzanne Césaire founded *Tropiques* together, along with other Martinican intellectuals like René Ménil. *Tropiques* ran from 1941 to 1945 and covertly contested the Vichy-supported government through the promotion of local culture and decolonial practice in addition to commenting on surrealism and pan-Africanism. Césaire used *Tropiques* as an opportunity to advance the philosophy of *Négritude*. *Tropiques* became prominent both in the Caribbean cultural sphere and caught the attention of the founder of surrealism, André Breton, who would also take a great interest in Hyppolite's work. Breton was so impressed with *Tropiques* that he published in the magazine in 1944. In the no. 9 issue of *Tropiques*, Breton published his essay "A Great Black Poet: Aimé Césaire," in which he discusses his discovery of Césaire through *Tropiques*, praises Césaire for his revolutionary and eloquent writing, recounts meeting Césaire in person, and discusses the significance of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. In the essay, Breton repeatedly calls Césaire a "genius" and describes what he saw upon meeting him as "in him is mankind's crucible at its greatest point of fermentation, where knowledge, here

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<sup>75</sup> Aimé Césaire, *The Original 1939 Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Albert James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), xv.

moreover in the highest order, interferes with magical powers.” He ends the essay by saying, “the word of Aimé Césaire-as beautiful as oxygen being born.”<sup>76</sup> In the footnotes, Breton announces the imminent English-language publication of *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* in New York, for which his essay also served as the preface.<sup>77</sup>

Césaire and Breton’s relationship, in addition to the entanglement between surrealism and *Tropiques*, demonstrates a clear tie between *Négritude* philosophy and Western avant-garde practices, which is then embodied in Hyppolite. Césaire employed surrealist tactics throughout his career in his writing, even going as far as editing *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* in 1956 to accentuate passages marked by free-associative metaphor, a marker of surrealism.<sup>78</sup> His wife, Suzanne Césaire, was perhaps an even greater proponent of the symbiotic relationship between Caribbean culture and surrealism. In 1943, Suzanne Césaire wrote an essay titled “Surrealism and Us,” which not only reiterates the clear association between prominent surrealists and Caribbean intellectuals but is also a vehement defense and celebration of surrealism and its influence in the Caribbean. Early in the essay, she praises Breton for his role in the spread of surrealism and French writing, claiming, “voices that would not be what they are (in tone and resonance) without surrealism resound everywhere: in New York, in Cuba...”<sup>79</sup> For Césaire, “voices,” like Hyppolite’s, can be found around the world and offer continued opportunities for the proliferation of surrealism and its antinationalist, anticolonial aims through the decolonial

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<sup>76</sup> André Breton, “A Great Black Poet: Aimé Césaire,” in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (New York: Verso, 1996), 191–97.

<sup>77</sup> Aimé Césaire, *The Original 1939 Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Albert James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), xvii.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>79</sup> Suzanne Césaire, “Surrealism and Us,” in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (Verso, 1996), 123.

resistance of these individuals. Throughout the essay, Césaire speaks highly of Breton and his commitment to liberating minds throughout the world with surrealism. Finally, she argues surrealism is how postcolonial societies will finally “rise up and be liberated.” She proclaims, “our surrealism [the Caribbean conceptualization of surrealism] will then deliver it. Finally, those sordid contemporary antinomies of black/white, European/African, civilized/savage will be transcended... Colonial stupidity will be purified in the blue welding flame. Our value, as metal, our cutting-edge of steel, our amazing communions will be rediscovered. Surrealism- the tightrope of our hope.”<sup>80</sup> Her essay shows a clear and welcomed relationship with surrealism, extending to social and political conceptions of surrealism as well. Césaire seemingly believes surrealism is the key to change when paired with *Négritude* philosophy.

Hector Hyppolite typifies the convergence of modern art aesthetics and *Négritude* philosophy. Hyppolite’s work not only illustrated Vodou themes, an aspect of Caribbean culture appreciated by *Négritude* philosophy, but also showed a heartfelt sense of pride in Haiti and veneration for everyday Haitian life. Art director and curator Michel-Philippe Lerebours claims, “the undercurrent of patriotism, if it did not dissolve into pathos, drove his work forward. For that reason it should not be overlooked or taken lightly.”<sup>81</sup> Hyppolite shows a particular pride in depicting the Haitian national flag; “... it uplifted him [Hyppolite] when he spoke of the Haitian flag. He never missed a chance to include it in his scenes of Vodou *ounfòs* and country landscapes or to use the flag’s colors-blue and red- in his decorative motifs.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 125-126.

<sup>81</sup> Michel-Philippe Lerebours, “In Search of Hector Hyppolite,” in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 32.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Lerebours is likely referencing works by Hyppolite such as *Purification Ceremony* (1948) and *Untitled (Harbor Town)* (1946-7). Both works feature a simplified Haitian flag centrally in the upper register of the painting. *Untitled (Harbor Town)* carries the mark of both the blue and the red throughout the piece. Many of the houses in the town are depicted as being painted the same rich blue as the flag. The city scene is then framed by two red, flowering trees on either side and dotted with both red- and blue-clothed citizens walking along the central pathway leading to the harbor. In the harbor floats a boat that waves the flag high in the sky (Figure 18). *Purification Ceremony* does not align with the palette of the Haitian flag in the same way; however, it represents Hyppolite's understanding of the integral link between Vodou and the Haitian nation-state with the flag flying over a Vodou purification ritual (Figure 19). Hyppolite also depicts the crest of the Haitian flag in his undated painting *National Flag* (Figure 20). The emphasis on the Haitian flag in Hyppolite's work recalls the sense of pride in Caribbean and pan-African descent promoted by *Négritude*, rather than affiliation with and affinity for the hegemonic Western powers that *Négritude* critiques.

Hyppolite further intertwines his faith and pride in Haiti through his various portraits of past Haitian presidents and historical heroes. Hyppolite created a portrait of many Haitian presidents and heroes, including Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Florvil Hyppolite, Henri Christophe, and Dumarsais Estimé. His choice of color palette remains largely red and blue, with each portrait featuring a depiction of the six Haitian flags (as seen within the national flag's crest) under the head of the central figure. Additionally, each figure is framed by vivacious flowers and vegetation that are reminiscent of how *loas* are traditionally depicted (Figure 21). Hyppolite once again correlates his faith and patriotism in what anthropologist Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique

terms “the artist’s double nationalistic and religious fiber.”<sup>83</sup> Similarly to the leaders of the *Négritude* movement, Hyppolite venerates figures of the Haitian Revolution and presidents who promoted Black and Haitian cultural development and appreciation.

Finally, Hyppolite’s work consistently represented the beauty of everyday life in Haitian society. Outside of his religiously charged imagery, Hyppolite also portrays scenes of fieldworkers, lunch scenes, women in domestic settings, women washing laundry in the river, men chopping wood, individuals fishing, and couples kissing. In Hyppolite’s two paintings titled *Abitan*, meaning farmer in Haitian Creole, he provides a full-body portrait of both a male and a female farmer in his signature “naive” style, including blocky sections of colors, vibrant colors, and unrealistic simplifications of figures forms and expressions. In the woman’s portrait, she is depicted in a knee-length blue dress, what appears to be a gold necklace and earrings, and a red scarf covering her hair. The background is a mixture of blue and orange on canvas with only a barren tree in the background to the right with a basket heaped with fruit underneath it, suggesting the labor of harvesting by the woman (Figure 22).

The man’s portrait renders him in a straw hat, yellow tank top with red edging, and knee-length jean shorts. The sun shines brightly directly behind the man with a green, flowering bush that is nearly the same height as the man to the right of where he stands. The man holds one chicken under his arm, and a second stands on the ground on the man’s opposite side with its wings flapping, a symbol for *gaguerre*- the cockfight (Figure 23). These paintings provide an insight into Hyppolite’s view of everyday Haitian life. The variety of scenes that Hyppolite

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<sup>83</sup> Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, “Hector Hyppolite: Master of the Skies and Waters,” in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 70-71.

depicts, as well as the portraiture of Haitian citizens, suggests that “he was enamored with all aspects of Haitian life.”<sup>84</sup> Hyppolite’s veneration of Haitian everyday life and individuals is an aesthetic practice intellectual leaders like Price-Mars, Damas, and Césaire would have been interested in as well. The celebration of middle to low-class citizens and their cultural practices were important facets of both *Indigénisme* and *Négritude*.

These veins within Hyppolite’s work can be interpreted through the philosophies of *Indigénisme* and *Négritude* in terms of its appreciation of Haitian peasant culture and life in addition to celebrating cultural connections to Africa, particularly Vodou. These qualities bolstered the amount of attention given to his works by figures within these movements, as well as those interested in the ideas they presented, such as Breton. While Hyppolite does not acknowledge either of these movements directly and mainly seems to produce works that interest him personally or align with his own ideologies, he is working at a time when *Indigénisme* and *Négritude* philosophies would have made such works even more appealing to both local and foreign audiences. Works such as these have also promoted Hyppolite as a champion of Haitian culture into the modern era. Hyppolite’s promotion of Haitian culture and society was celebrated by many of his contemporaries, including his son-in-law Rigaud Benoit, who paid homage to Hyppolite through his own distinct painting style. In a work by Benoit from collector Astrid Jaeger’s collection, Benoit resurrects his father-in-law from a pool of water in the woods, a ceremony in which all of humanity and nature partake (Figure 24).<sup>85</sup> This conception of Hyppolite as a champion of Black and Haitian culture is also seen in Haitian senator and art

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<sup>84</sup> Astrid Jaeger, “A Collector’s Impressions of Hector Hyppolite,” in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 96.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

collector Rudolph H. Boulos's statement that Hyppolite was "true to himself and to Haiti," referencing both his identity as a Black man in the Francophone Caribbean and as a Haitian.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Senator Rudolph H. Boulos, "Honoring Hector Hyppolite," in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 86.

## V. An Appraisal of Hyppolite as a Surrealist-At-Large

Outside of the Caribbean cultural and social sphere, surrealism and its founder, André Breton, played an important role in shaping Hector Hyppolite's career. While Hyppolite's art demonstrates a clear admiration for Haiti and Haitian culture, Breton and other surrealists do not see this as opposed to their anti-nationalism but rather in terms of liberation. Hyppolite's work is received as both a cultural liberation, similar to the *Négritude* movement, and a liberation of the unconscious due to his Vodou-based artistic production. Surrealism's influence is evident in Caribbean modern art. However, in the unique case study of surrealism and the Caribbean, there is some dispute over the relationship between the two, particularly due to the status of most polities in the Caribbean from the late 1920s to the 1950s as either existing or former colonies of European powers. Art historian Michael Richardson explores this relationship in the introduction to *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (1996). He argues that the First World War, especially in regard to France, played a significant role in shifting relationships between colonial powers and those under their control, bringing the two into more of a partnership. He claims that this shift, combined with surrealism's "generalized revolt against the very foundations of Western civilization and its morality," opened the door for the exchange seen between European and non-Western artists at this time.<sup>87</sup> This connection between surrealism and decolonial Caribbean scholars can be seen through members of the *Négritude* movement.

Martinican writer and philosopher René Ménénil's essay "For a Critical Reading of *Tropiques*" (1973) not only responds to the intricacies of French cultural hegemony in the Caribbean but also demonstrates a clear awareness of surrealist ideas and exhibits how Ménénil and

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<sup>87</sup> Michael Richardson, "Introduction," in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (Verso, 1996), 3.

others are responding to these concepts within Caribbean culture. Ménéil refutes the claim that Caribbean literature is “unable to define itself as Caribbean” due to its use of the French language, saying that this is “outrageous” and based on the flawed idea that language and the mentality of peoples, cultures, and nationalities are intertwined irrevocably despite separate geographical locations and experiences, and ignores the Caribbean as opposed to French aesthetics and elements within these works.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, Ménéil acknowledges the influence of writers such as Breton and Arthur Rimbaud on him and other Caribbean writers, like Aimé Césaire. Ménéil describes his and Césaire’s work as using these French artists “images and linguistic constructions” as a “point of departure” but not the “dominant factor” or “focal element.” In fact, he argues the Caribbean elements and mythological themes are rather the most significant aspects of these writings.<sup>89</sup> Ménéil, like Suzanne Césaire in “Surrealism and Us,” emphasizes a symbiotic connection between the Western avant-garde practices of surrealism and the decolonial movements of the Caribbean.

Haitian poet and writer Clément Magloire-Saint-Aude also praises the impact of surrealism in the Caribbean in two short journal excerpts from 1941 and 1942 titled “A Record about Surrealism” and “Surrealism: What It Is.” In “A Record about Surrealism,” Magloire-Saint-Aude says that surrealism rejects conformity to the historical or traditional roles and ideals of society and allows no limits to be placed upon one physically or mentally; because of this, it does not appeal to “superficial minds”; rather, it “entices rebels... those who can not be forced to

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<sup>88</sup> René Ménéil, “For a Critical Reading of *Tropiques*,” in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (Verso, 1996), 73.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 71-72.

behave” and is “venerated by disciples of every race.”<sup>90</sup> Similar to Césaire, Magloire-Saint-Aude views surrealism as a tool for the liberation of society and highlights the ability for individuals of any race to partake in its practice. In “Surrealism: What It Is,” he calls surrealism “an attitude of reaction, defiance, and distrust. A distrust of the illusory philosophies at the level of the naive, a distrust of unctuous and sonorous morals.”<sup>91</sup> He regards surrealism as a natural state of mind or being for one recovering from existence under a colonial regime. Despite its French origins, Magloire-Saint-Aude aims to “cannibalize” the concept of surrealism and apply it to the Caribbean situation, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between these two entities.<sup>92</sup>

Haitian artist and poet Paul Laraque underscores the veneration of surrealism in Haiti by Caribbean intellectuals, artists, and the local student population during his account of Breton’s visit in 1945-46 in which Breton was invited to give a series of lectures that would ultimately culminate in the convergence of local student, Marxist, and artistic populations in a successful coup against President Lescot. Laraque credits Aimé Césaire with the introduction of surrealism to Caribbean culture, as opposed to the French surrealists imposing their artistic ideals on post-colonial culture. Furthermore, Laraque describes the warm welcome that Breton received upon his arrival from fellow artists and the local student population. He recalls waiting for Breton at the airport with other artists and his initial reaction to seeing Breton: “to see him was to grasp the

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<sup>90</sup> Clément Magloire-Saint-Aude, “A Record about Surrealism,” in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (Verso, 1996), 234.

<sup>91</sup> Clément Magloire-Saint-Aude, “Surrealism: What It Is,” in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (Verso, 1996), 235.

<sup>92</sup> The term “cannibalize” is used in relation to Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade’s “*Manifesto Antropófago*” (Cannibalist Manifesto) from 1928, in which he encouraged Brazilian modern artists to appropriate, consume, digest, and assimilate European theories and styles as a way to advance Brazilian avant-garde.

beauty of the angel of revolt.”<sup>93</sup> He refers to the students' reaction to Breton as “electrifying,” saying, “enthusiasm rose to a fever pitch and at the end of the lecture, he left to a standing ovation.”<sup>94</sup> This connection between surrealism and decolonial practice in the Caribbean established the conditions that resulted in Breton and Hyppolite’s convergence.

Finally, outside of the Caribbean sphere, Breton’s own writings about Caribbean artists reiterate the symbiosis of this relationship. This is shown particularly in his essay about Hyppolite. Hyppolite’s so-called “discovery” by André Breton has long been surrounded by a complicated notion of myth-making, which once again establishes European artists as the tastemakers of the art world, gifted with the power to elevate outsider or “primitive” artists to the status of “true artists.” However, Breton himself refutes this idea in his essay, crediting Haitian writer Philippe Thoby-Marcelin with the discovery instead.<sup>95</sup> While Thoby-Marcelin discovered Hyppolite, for an American-founded institution, Hyppolite’s global fame was realized by the French surrealists and the Négritude writers initially until he was once again reclaimed by Haitian nationalist critics.

In addition to Breton’s appreciation of Hyppolite’s paintings, he also had a fascination with Hyppolite’s connection to and the depiction of Vodou. As a result, some scholars, including Richardson, have argued surrealism’s interest was superficial, with an interest only in Vodou practices and with coordinated visits aimed at gaining access to such knowledge, an accusation that could apply to Breton and Hyppolite. In his article Breton claims, “as far as I am aware,

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<sup>93</sup> Paul Laraque, “André Breton in Haiti,” in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (Verso, 1996), 218.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 221.

<sup>95</sup> André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston, MA: MFA Publications, a division of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2002), 308.

Hector Hyppolite's paintings are the first ever to record actual voodoo scenes and divinities, and in this respect alone, as primitive religious paintings, they would carry considerable importance."<sup>96</sup> Similar to surrealism's use of automatism, Hyppolite is known to have often worked in a state of possession. Art historian Pierre Apraxine argues the significance of Vodou and Hyppolite's work, saying, "because of his psychic prowess, Hyppolite was able, more than any other Haitian artist, to link images to the deep currents of the unconscious," reminiscent of the surrealists.<sup>97</sup> Rodman elaborates further: "painting for Hyppolite was an act of religious possession. When under the influence of his possession, he painted beautifully. When he was not possessed, he could paint, but dreadfully dull works, some of the most trite, the most boring ever seen at the Centre d'Art."<sup>98</sup>

Importantly, Hyppolite was vocal about Vodou and his spirituality not because of his connection to surrealism or any modernist movement but rather because of his own personal convictions. Hyppolite commented on the significance of the relationship between his art and religion to American journalist Edith Efron Bogat, explaining, "my mind is constantly directed toward painting. This focus comes from St. John the Baptist. He gives me this focus... I have always been inspired by the *loa*. The Mermaid [La Sirène] and St. John take care of me. The Mermaid helps me earn money. St. John gives me ideas for my paintings."<sup>99</sup> As a result of his artistic practices and depiction of Vodou themes and imagery, Hyppolite was "claimed by

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<sup>96</sup> André Breton, "Hector Hyppolite," in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston, MA: MFA Publications, a division of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2002), 311.

<sup>97</sup> Michel-Philippe Lerebours, "In Search of Hector Hyppolite," in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 30.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>99</sup> Michel-Philippe Lerebours, "In Search of Hector Hyppolite," in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 30.

Surrealists such as Breton and brought Surrealist exchanges in the Caribbean to possibilities of encountering the marvelous through his portrayals of the Vodou pantheon.”<sup>100</sup>

Beyond Hyppolite’s inclusion of Vodou iconography, his work was appreciated in modernist circles for its naive qualities. Rodman notes that Hyppolite’s “faulty drawing” became “sure enough of the style created” and added to Hyppolite’s perceived authentic, subconscious mode of production. These “flaws” more effectively captured his visions in the minds of Western audiences than a polished painting founded on realism was capable of.<sup>101</sup> Hyppolite’s style was also characterized by a lack of perspective, “the paint laid on in almost savage strokes,” bold colors juxtaposed, and “bordering flowers of blue, pink, and silver that were strangely luminescent.”<sup>102</sup> These unique stylistic qualities were celebrated by modernists for their “primitive” qualities and read as a marker of genuine artistic production.

Presently, Hyppolite’s work has been included in major exhibitions of surrealist works such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 2021 exhibition *Surrealism Beyond Borders* and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth’s 2023 exhibition *Surrealism and Us: Caribbean and African Diasporic Artists since 1940*. However, as Dr. Joseph-Gabriel aptly emphasizes, Hyppolite was “claimed” by the surrealists, not the other way around. He never formally joined the movement, spoke about any influence from surrealism on his work, or claimed to be a surrealist artist himself. Furthermore, Breton also attempted to incorporate Hyppolite into Jean Dubuffet’s art brut. In art historian Roger Cardinal’s article “Surrealism and the Paradigm of the

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<sup>100</sup> Stephanie D’Alessandro, Matthew Gale, and Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, “Haiti, Martinique, Cuba,” in *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (New York, N.Y: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021), 77.

<sup>101</sup> Selden Rodman, *The Miracle of Haitian Art* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1974), 31.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

Creative Subject," Cardinal explains, "nowadays we might plausibly categorize Hyppolite as a naive or even popular artist; at the time [of Breton's discovery of Hyppolite], Jean Dubuffet, to whom Breton showed the work, was prepared to see Hyppolite as a candidate for his art brut collection."<sup>103</sup> However, Hyppolite was not officially added to Dubuffet's art brut canon either. Although Hyppolite's work had a great impact on Breton, it is difficult to label Hyppolite as a surrealist solely based on the interaction between him and Breton during Hyppolite's lifetime.

Hyppolite was a celebrated artist by members of the *Négritude* movement, many of whom considered themselves surrealists, as well as European-based surrealists, including Breton. In spite of this appreciation, the artistic practice for Hyppolite remained an extremely personal, spiritual experience. Hyppolite found a friend and patron in the European art world through Breton, but he certainly did not find a mentor. Hyppolite's artistic muses would remain the *loas*, particularly his spiritual wife, La Sirène, until the end of his life.

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<sup>103</sup> Roger Cardinal, "Surrealism & the Paradigm of the Creative Subject," in *Outsider Art* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 100.

## VI. The Legacy of Hyppolite

Hyppolite died suddenly of a heart attack in 1948, only four years after joining the Centre d'Art and three years after meeting Breton. His death was mourned around the world by his colleagues and his patrons, and by the loas, according to Morisseau-Leroy. Hyppolite continued producing art until his death, with some of his colleagues claiming he died in front of his final painting with his paintbrush in hand. His final piece was preserved by Bishop Voegeli, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti, indicating the official recognition of Hyppolite's work in Haiti and his ability to thrive even under policies of the suppression of Vodou. His final work, left as a sketch, depicts a Vodou ritual led by a *mambo*, including sacrificial birds and a goat, despite the sacrifice of animals being the most vehemently cracked down on by the Haitian government and church. Hyppolite's impact on Haitian culture, convergence with the *Négritude* movement, and relationship with the European avant-garde through surrealism have earned him the title of "Grand Maître" of Haitian art. He was able to act as a conduit for the cultural, social, and artistic developments of the time.

Hyppolite has remained one of, if not the most famous, Haitian painters. He became the model for the next generation of Haitian artists both at the Centre d'Art and the Foyer des Arts Plastiques. In addition to paving the path for the appreciation of Vodou and African culture in Haitian modern art and cementing the relationship between the Western avant-garde and these practices. However, even six decades after his death, the purveyors of his influence and legacy are confronted with the mysticism of Hyppolite. Journalist Bill Brubaker recounts the frustration of members of the Haitian art community at the cancellation of their planned year-long celebration in 2008 of the "Year of Hyppolite." In an effort to still celebrate the following year,

admirers attempted to place a bouquet on Hyppolite's grave. "The bouquet was a splendid idea. Hyppolite, after all, had decorated many of his paintings with flowers. So, yes, the widely acknowledged father of Haiti's primitive art movement deserved a floral arrangement, if not his very own botanical garden."<sup>104</sup> However, when it came time to organize the event, it was realized that no one knew where he was buried despite the occurrence of a funeral in 1948. Lerebours elaborates, "his own family doesn't even know where he's buried. In fact, we don't know how many children he had."<sup>105</sup> Breton called Hyppolite "the guardian of a secret," perhaps many secrets of which he still keeps, including his final resting place. Brubaker posits that this "suits Hyppolite just fine" and that "that bouquet that was destined for his grave? It would have been beautiful, no doubt. But for this mystical painter with the unfettered imagination those flowers may have been a bit too real."<sup>106</sup> Despite Hyppolite's profound impact on Haitian modern art, global reach, and appreciation, the artist retains his aura of mysticism even in death.

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<sup>104</sup> Bill Brubaker, "A Bouquet for Haiti's Inspiring But Confounding Mystical Artist," in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master, Hector Hyppolite* (Washington D.C.: Haitian Art Society, 2012), 89.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 92.

## Image Appendix



Figure 1: Hyppolite and Dewitt Peters at the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince in 1947, a black-and-white photograph taken by Selden Rodman, published in Rodman's 1988 book *Haiti: Where Art is Joy*.



Figure 2: Hector Hyppolite, *Adoration à la Sainte Vierge*, 1945, oil on cardboard, 74.5 x 66.3 cm (29 3/8 x 26 1/8 in.), Association Atelier André Breton, <https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600100894670>.



Figure 3: Hyppolite with two of his paintings: *The Voodoo God, master Adam and The Goddess Adanizau, his mistress*, 1945, black-and-white photography from Breton's trip to Haiti, Association Atelier André Breton, <https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600101000792>.



Figure 4: A dinner prepared by Madame Hyppolite in their house, 1945, black-and-white photography from Breton's trip to Haiti, Association Atelier André Breton, <https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600101000792>.



Figure 5: Hyppolite painting *Master Adami*, 1945, black-and-white photography from Breton's trip to Haiti, Association Atelier André Breton, <https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600101000792>.

HECTOR HYPOLITE

Je reverrai longtemps à la place qu'il occupait, au pied de l'escalier qui menait aux salles d'exposition, le premier tableau d'Hypolite qui m'eut fait voir et qui me causa le plus vif, le plus agréable saisissement. C'était au "Centre d'art" de Port-au-Prince, en décembre 1945, dans cette vieille maison charmante de la rue de la Révolution où un Américain nommé De Witt Peters avait eu l'idée de réunir les productions d'un certain nombre d'artistes haïtiens pour la plupart autodidactes et de leur offrir des occasions de peindre en ayant à leur disposition et de leur part et des crayons et des tubes à la disposition des amateurs. Cette préoccupation lucrative n'était certes pas exclue de l'entreprise - les galeries d'art "privatives" dispose d'une assez large clientèle américaine - mais l'intérêt qui s'attachait sous le rapport de l'encouragement et de la suscitation faisait mieux que compenser ce côté commercial de l'affaire.

Le tableau d'Hypolite qui m'arrivait au passage m'arrivait comme une bouffée de fraîcheur de printemps. Avant même que je me sois rendu compte de son sujet, il me parvenait comme un don pur de choses heureuses. Il y avait là l'équivalent de ce que procurent les plus belles journées dans la campagne, les plus tendres aspects de l'herbe, les semis qui livrent les bons d'or, les diaprures des arbres, les corps de cimabais minuscules des fleurs qui pantoient, la jonglerie des fruits aux moires de l'arc-en-ciel. Au centre, une échappée sur le ciel comme on peut l'avoir dans une clairière. C'est seulement le premier éblouissement passé que l'œuvre s'organise selon l'ordonnance de son auteur; la tache bleue se précisait en robe de la vierge, et c'était elle, en effet, que deux anges paraissent d'une couronne couleur de pollen et c'était aussi sur un lit de pollen que l'enfant reposait à ses pieds, fûté d'orange, de raisins, de cerises, de bananes et entouré d'anges jouant de la trompette ou tenant des flambeaux. Trace d'une courbe gauche on pouvait lire, au dessous d'un petit linge ouvert, le mot "Adoration"; rien d'assez ou ne s'en fait qu'un caractère.

Bien qu'on ne peut pas dire qu'elle soit d'un grand intérêt, cette œuvre et celles qui, à peu près au même moment, ont été réalisées par d'autres artistes, elles étaient les seules dans la galerie Peters qui eussent été réalisées par un artiste qui avait une message d'importance à faire parvenir, qu'il était en possession d'un secret. Avec elles, à certains égards, nous attachons un tout autre prix aux moyens qu'un artiste emploie à sa tâche. Plus de quatre cents œuvres ont été réalisées sous cet angle, la peinture d'Hypolite peut être regardée pure de tout alliage, sonnant comme le métal vierge.

Si je me souviens bien Hypolite avait été découvert par l'écrivain haïtien Philippe Thoby Marcelin qui avait travaillé avec lui pendant quelque temps de projection à l'intérieur de l'île. C'est, je crois, une découverte esthétique d'un petit élite de rhum qui avait attiré cette attention. On avait fait venir à Port-au-Prince, et le Centre d'art acquiescait ses peintures à raison de quelques "gourdes" chacune, exactement l'équivalent de vingt-cinq "cents" américains. Ces peintures étaient exécutées au moyen d'une sorte de répotier sur des cartons à base de plâtre et de papier qui, même après le passage de la couleur perdait une partie de sa force. Dernière de brosses, Hypolite étendait cette couleur avec une plume ou la distribuait avec les doigts. Son dévouement matériel passait pour estimé.

Je le rencontrai, à quelques jours de là, dans ce même local du Centre d'art. C'était un homme de moins de vingt ans, noir, aux traits fins,

Figure 6: Handwritten text by André Breton dedicated to Hector Hypolite, dated October 1948, Association Atelier André Breton, <https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600100924520>.

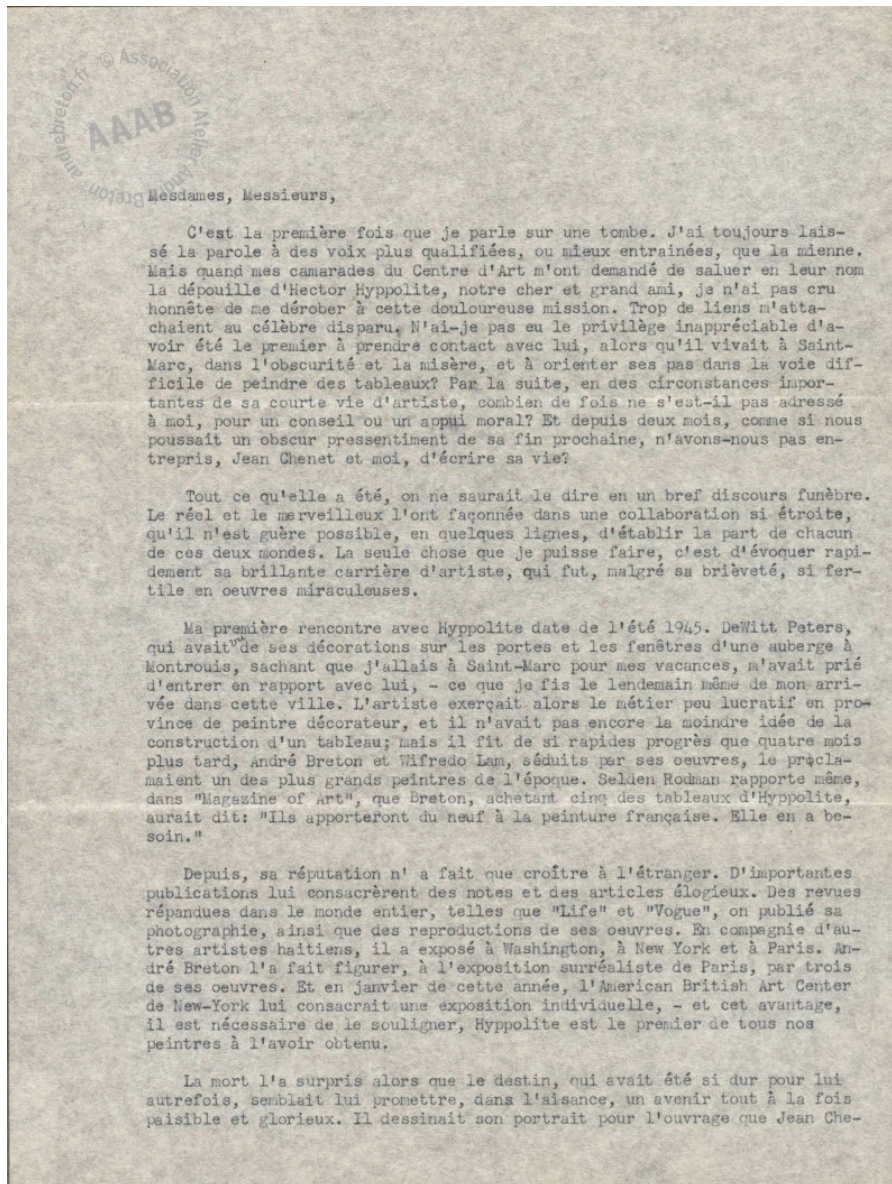


Figure 7: A transcript of Philippe Thoby-Marcelin's speech for Hyppolite's funeral that he sent to André Breton in 1948, Association Atelier André Breton, <https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600101000791>.



Figure 8: Hector Hyppolite, *Une prostituée*, 1946, oil on board, courtesy The Gallery of Everything © Hector Hyppolite The Gallery of Everything

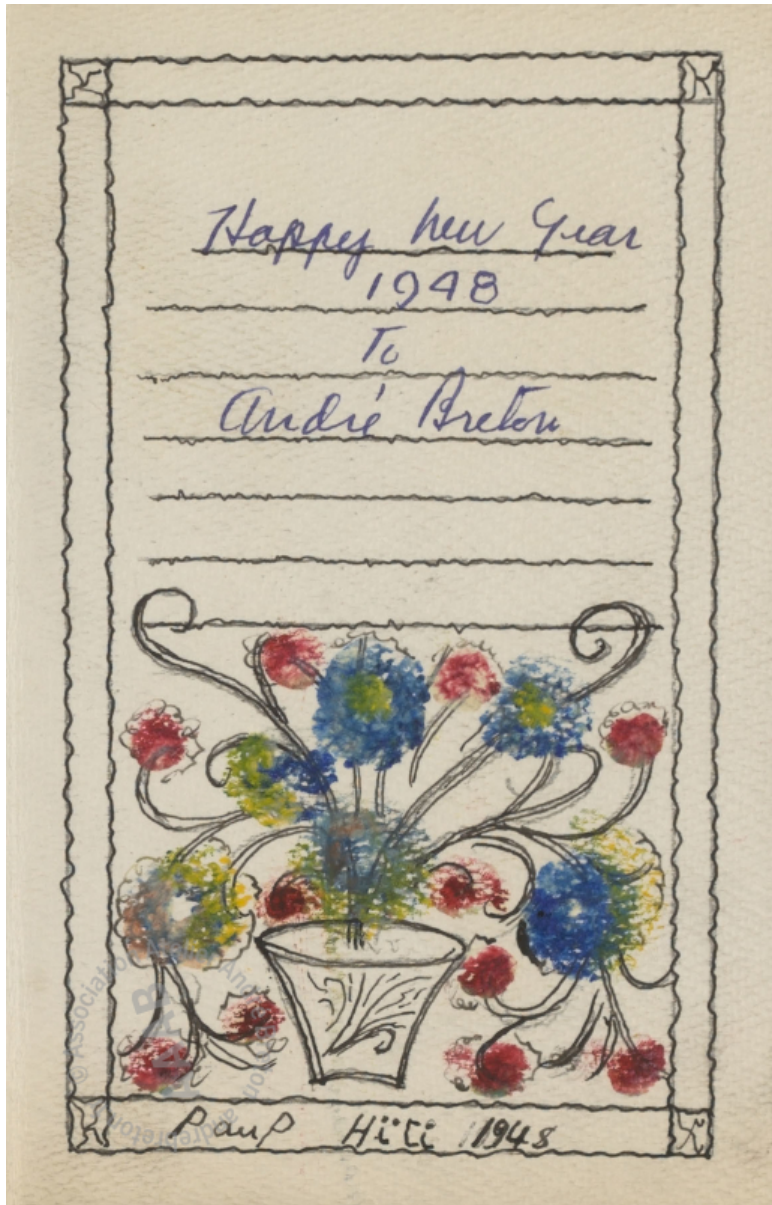


Figure 9: Greeting card from Hector Hyppolite addressed to André Breton for the New Year 1948, Association Atelier André Breton, <https://www.andrebreton.fr/en/work/56600101000793>.



Figure 10: Jason Seley, *Hector Hyppolite Death Mask*, 1948, metal, 7 3/4 x 4 7.8 x 4 inches, The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/jason-seley-hector-hyppolite-death-mask-1948>.

nouveauté; mais, grâce aux croquis dont elle était accompagnée, grâce au tableau de mœurs qui forme l'accessoire de l'événement politique, nous avons jugé qu'elle était digne de la curiosité de nos lecteurs.

A Monsieur le Directeur du journal l'Illustration.

Monsieur,

Je vous annonce que les affaires des Haïtiens avec leurs voisins les Dominicains viennent d'avoir une issue politique, grâce à la médiation de l'Angleterre jointe à celle de la France.

Depuis longtemps on se savait à quel s'en tenait sur le projet de l'empereur Soulouque, cette indication n'était cependant pas connue, et j'ai l'honneur de vous en faire part. Les gouvernements anglais et français se déclarent enfin à mettre un terme à cet état de choses. Une escadre anglo-française, composée de trois vapeurs : l'Infernale (anglais), le Constantin (français), le Minie (français), et d'un bric de vingt canons, français, l'Oléaire, fut envoyée à Port-au-Prince, mais n'y trouva que l'empereur, qui était allé faire une tournée dans son empire, accompagné de ses forces militaires et navales.

Après un mois d'attente, les conseils des deux nations négocieuses déclarèrent qu'il était préférable à l'humanité à l'avenir, qu'au point d'achever sa tournée, se trouvait en ce moment aux Gonaïves, petit port assez important, à 40 milles O. de Port-au-Prince.

Soulouque repartit qu'au point de son retour dans la capitale il terminerait cette affaire. Le soir de ce même jour, l'escadre française apparut dans les Gonaïves pour annoncer le prochain retour de Soulouque à Port-au-Prince. A cette nouvelle la joie se répandit partout, et avec lui l'idée de sa vengeance. A chaque instant l'on pouvait entendre que les habitants étaient rommeaux avec les Dominicains, et cette pensée courait pour beaucoup à espérer voir de leur deuil qui couvrait la ville. On se préparait donc à recevoir dignement le soleil d'aurore.

Les rues se précipitèrent de tous côtés l'on entendit le roulement du tambour qui fait danser le peuple. L'antique esplanade s'élevait d'un arc de triomphe en bois sous lequel passait Sa Majesté. Cet arc est élevé près de la porte d'entrée de la ville, sur le chemin de la croix-des-dominiques. En avant de l'arc, et des deux côtés de la route, dressent une foule de petites cabanes en feuillage pour abriter les danseurs et les danseuses. Les gens de la campagne descendent en grand nombre des routes



Entrée de Souloque à Haïti.



Avant-garde de l'armée haïtienne.

pour danser le vaudou, espèce de danse sauvage venant directement d'Afrique, et autorisée par le gouvernement.

La religion du vaudou n'est autre chose que le paganisme d'une partie des tribus noires d'Afrique, on y adore, entre autres divinités, les coquevres; on y sacrifie des animaux, dont le sacrifice est à l'accomplissement de quelques vœux. Les ministres de cette religion sont les *prêtres*.

La femme qui veut danser le vaudou commence par faire le tour de l'assemblée, en embrassant ses parents et ses amis; elle salue aussi les papilles, qui l'ont reconstruit ordinairement à un mariage en milieu noir sur la tête; cela fait, elle s'échoue, et commence, au son du tambour, une série de mouvements et de contorsions de tous les membres, dans le but de se débarrasser complètement, en suivant toutefois le plus ou moins de rigueur de la mesure du tambour. Pendant ce temps les spectateurs qui sont de la secte applaudissent en battant des mains, en agitant des instruments composés d'une cage en ferblain renfermant de petits cailloux, et en battant pour exciter la danseuse à gagner ce qu'ils appellent la *foi*. Bientôt les vêtements qu'elle porte lui deviennent à charge; ses amis s'approchent alors d'elle, la couvrent, lui enlèvent le maillot qui lui remplace son bandeau sur le front, puis la robe, se lui laissant qu'une chemise et un jupon afin de pouvoir se débarrasser encore et gagner enfin la *foi*. Elle tombe évanouie dans l'arc, non sans avoir



Danse du vaudou.

échangé de grandes poignées de main avec le peuple qui précède gravement à la suite. Cette fois elle y va de si bon cœur, toute l'âme de son être-même pour s'élever, s'élever tellement aux sons du tambour et aux cris de ceux qui l'entourent, qu'elle tombe finalement dans une espèce d'épilepsie, sans ou réelle, mais des yeux effrayables, fait une figure atroce, et va tomber la première aux pieds du papage, qui, après l'avoir haussé se rouler quelques instants, la relève, fait quelques simagrèmes, et la remet enfin pieds à terre, à son tour de faire recevoir à la vie. La danse redouble ses cris de joie, la danseuse a gagné la *foi*, et à ce moment, sans doute, que l'on fait des sacrifices dont j'ai parlé plus haut, mais qui heureusement ne sont tolérés qu'à la campagne.

Telles sont les danses grossières que l'on pouvait voir dans beaucoup de cabanes. Ces fêtes durent huit jours avant et après l'arrivée de l'empereur, le soir beaucoup de promeneurs venaient autour de cette scène bruyante de leur présence. Enfin le jour tant désiré arriva. La ville était entièrement pavée, ainsi que l'arc de triomphe; un temps superbe favorisait l'entrée de Soulouque.

Vers huit heures l'avant-garde fit son entrée; impossible de décrire l'état de défilement de ces mille hommes, harassés par des marches forcées sous le soleil ardent de Saint-Domingue. Beaucoup n'avaient plus que des vêtements d'indienne; l'un, une vieille épaulette; l'autre, une seule basque rattachée à la ceinture par un bout de corde, etc.

L'antérieur arriva ensuite dans un état non moins affreux; chaque bataillon, précédé par une musique composée d'une ou de deux clarinettes avec grand rouflet de grosses caisses, tambours et fifres. La cavalerie précédait immédiatement l'empereur et son état-major, celui-ci était un peu moins misérable que les premiers, cela se conçoit, ce qui n'empêche pas que beaucoup d'entre eux avaient perdu leurs bottes, mais portaient leurs épées sur les cuillères. Enfin arriva l'empereur entouré de son état-major, l'impératrice et les dames de la cour, à cheval, rivalisant avec les cavaliers, une cavalcade splendide et digne de la ville de Souloque. Pour le coup le spectacle était magnifique de contrastes avec celui qui venait de nous passer sous les yeux.

Ces messieurs, à commencer par Faustin, étaient généralement habillés d'une façon splendide et dans le dernier goût. Les deux côtés éclairaient les cris de: Vive l'empereur! Vive la princesse Ulvier! etc. Le cortège fit son entrée momentanément au milieu d'un grand bruit de coups de feu et des acclamations en règle; il se rendit directement à la cathédrale, on l'on chanta un *Te Deum* pour célébrer le retour de Faustin.

Dans la soirée on illumina. On préférait que l'empereur fût vu par les dames qui continuaient toujours à danser, et assister

à la levée de l'arc de triomphe; mais la fatigue l'en empêcha sans doute, il n'eut que le honneur de passer, chef de la police, qui fit des largesses et de la population.

Quelques jours après, Soulouque revint la réponse qu'il avait promise aux Gonaïves, relativement aux Dominicains: il consentit à accéder à ce qu'il avait promis leur déclarer la guerre, c'est-à-dire qu'il voulait reprendre de nouveau les armes contre la partie est de l'île, il était prêté une armée à l'avance les deux nations militaires.

Cette nouvelle se répandit bientôt au bruit des salves des batteries de guerre en règle; elle réjouit un peu le commerce en faisant renouer la confiance dans les esprits. Il serait à désirer pour ce pauvre empire haïtien de rester en paix longtemps, bon sang! mais va de l'empire de jour en jour.

Cette dernière année devint d'ailleurs fertile, elle pourrait être féconde en grande partie, et en faisant cultiver par ses habitants cette bonne et fertile terre de Saint-Domingue, l'empire se releverait peut-être, et les Haïtiens se verraient plus nombreux d'être effrayés de la lutte des nations, comme ils le sont, si le système actuel est maintenu.

J'ai l'honneur,

Monsieur,

De vous saluer avec considération distinguée.

A. FIGUARD.

Figure 11: Page 124 from the February 21, 1852 issue of L'Illustration in which Vodou dancing in the streets to celebrate Souloque's return to the capital is depicted, HaitiTrust, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.c008845729&seq=132&q1=feb+21+.



Figure 12: Alexander King, Illustration of Zombies in *The Magic Island*, printed in Seabrook's book *The Magic Island* in 1929.



Figure 13: Hector Hyppolite, *Vol de Zombis*, 1946, oil on cardboard, 66 x 81 cm., The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/vol-de-zombis>.



Figure 14: Hector Hyppolite, *Henri Christophe Calling the Spirits*, 1946-47, oil on board, 29 x 21 in., The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/hyppolite-henri-christophe-calling-the-spirits-1946-47>.



Figure 15: Hector Hyppolite, *Ogou Feray*, 1945, oil on board, 52 x 71 cm., The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/hector-hyppolite-ogou-feray-1945>.



Figure 16: Hector Hyppolite, *Damballah Le Flambeau*, 1946-48, oil on board, 30 x 24 in., The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/damballah-le-flambeau-1946-48>.



Figure 17: Hector Hyppolite, *Damballah Le Flambeau*, 1946-48, oil on board, 30 x 24 in., The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/hector-hyppolite-damballah-la-flambeau-1946-48>.



Figure 18: Hector Hyppolite, *Untitled (Harbor Town)*, 1946-48, oil on board, 21.5 x 18.25 in., The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/hector-hyppolite-untitled-harbor-town-1944-48>.



Figure 19: Hector Hyppolite, *Purification Ceremony*, 1948, oil on board, 46.5 x 34.6 in., The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/hector-hyppolite-purification-ceremony-1948>.



Figure 20: Hector Hyppolite, *National Flag*, 1948, oil on cardboard mounted on wood, 29 15/16 x 26 5/16 in., credit to Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/national-flag>.



Figure 21: Hector Hyppolite, *Le President Florvil Hyppolite*, 1945-47, oil and pencil on paper board, The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/hector-hyppolite-le-president-florvil-hyppolite-1945-1947>.



Figure 22: Hector Hyppolite, *Abitan*, date unknown, oil on board, courtesy of the Astrid Jaeger collection, printed in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master Hector Hyppolite*.

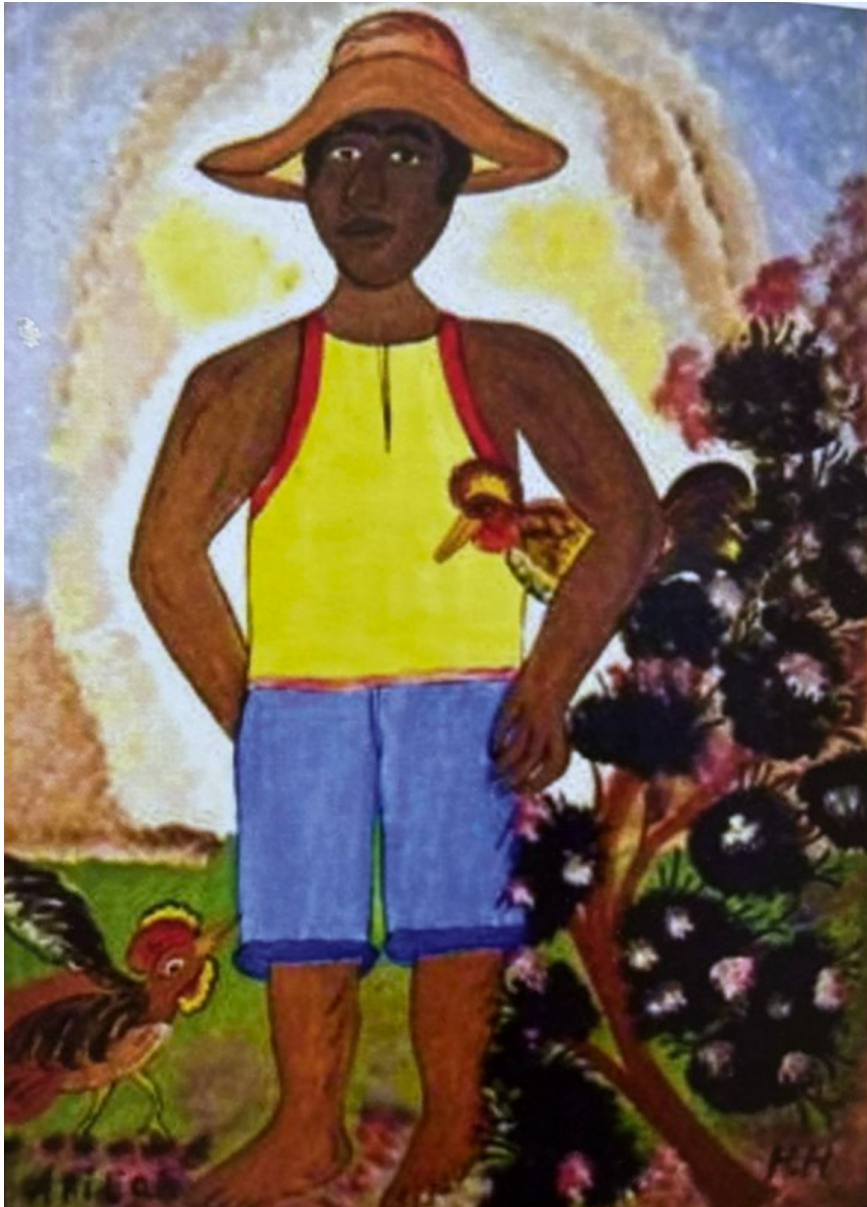


Figure 23: Hector Hyppolite, *Abitan*, date unknown, oil on board, courtesy of the Astrid Jaeger collection, printed in *Mystical Imagination: The Art of Haitian Master Hector Hyppolite*.



Figure 24: Rigaud Benoit, *The Recall of Hector Hyppolite*, 1978, oil on board, 32 x 24 in., credit to the Astrid Jaeger collection, The Haitian Art Society, <https://haitianartsociety.org/recall-of-hector-hyppolite-1978>.

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