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Inventing Haitian Art:  
How Visitors Shaped Cultural Production  
From Occupation to Renaissance

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Culture and Performance

by

Peter Lockwood Haffner

2013



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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Inventing Haitian Art:  
How Visitors Shaped Cultural Production  
From Occupation to Renaissance

by

Peter Lockwood Haffner

Master of Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professors Allen F. and Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts, Co-Chairs

For Western audiences the appeal of Haitian art often lies in how it represents exoticism, tropicality, and “primitivism.” Both in Haiti and throughout the world, works of Haitian art are bought and sold as souvenirs, decorative art objects, and fine art. This thesis will demonstrate how writers, artists, art dealers, curators, and collectors have shaped and advanced narratives that define Haitian visual culture in terms of Haiti’s otherness. It sheds light on the entangled relationships between those in the Haitian arts community and foreign travelers. Interactions between these two groups shaped dominant narratives concerning art and culture in Haiti. This thesis will examine two key periods: the U.S. Marine occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and the “Haitian Renaissance” that began in the 1940s. I will frame Haiti in these periods as a “contact zone” in which cross-cultural negotiations and interactions occurred between Haitians and those visiting the country for myriad purposes.

The thesis of Peter Lockwood Haffner is approved.

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2013

Table of Contents

Introduction ..... 1

Chapter 1: The U.S. Marine Occupation of Haiti ..... 12

Chapter 2: The Haitian Renaissance ..... 41

Conclusion ..... 59

Figures ..... 63

Bibliography ..... 71

For Western audiences the appeal of Haitian art often lies in how it represents exoticism, tropicality, and “primitivism.” Both in Haiti and throughout the world, works of Haitian art are bought and sold as souvenirs, decorative art objects, and fine art. How have writers, artists, art dealers, curators, and collectors shaped and advanced narratives that define Haitian visual culture in terms of Haiti’s otherness? How did “Haitian art” come to be classified as such and what are the consequences of this designation? What discourses have been put forward in the writing on art objects from Haiti and where are they leading?

This thesis sheds light on the entangled relationships between those in the Haitian arts community and foreign travelers. Interactions between these two groups shaped dominant narratives concerning art and culture in Haiti. I will examine two key periods: the U.S. Marine occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and the “Haitian Renaissance” that began in the 1940s. I will discuss Haiti in these periods as a “contact zone” in which cross-cultural negotiations and interactions occurred between Haitians and those visiting the country for myriad purposes. I locate some of the major underpinning racial and socio-political motivations, many of them illuminated by tourism studies, which informed these reasons for travel. This thesis will identify many of the resulting cultural dynamics and consider how they led to the broad designation and understanding of “Haitian art” that exists today.

The term “contact zone” was invented by Mary-Louis Pratt to describe complex interactions and exchanges that occur between individuals from different cultures within a particular location. She writes: “‘contact zone’ is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence [sic] of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect” (Pratt 1992: 7). Pratt’s definition provides the framework for us

to critically interrogate art historical approaches that confine Haitian visual arts to the marginalized end of a dichotomy relationship between two monolithic cultural groups. Such readings fail to address the complexity of exchanges that occurred within the contact zones of Haiti during the occupation and the Haitian Renaissance. Haiti itself has a history of providing the physical space where individuals gathered and interacted under a variety of circumstances; some traveled there by choice (French colonials, African-American artists, “sophisticated” white tourists) and others not (enslaved African labor, U.S. soldiers on deployment).

The contact zone allows us to account for the intricacies of individual motivation and circumstance. Pratt’s theory gives space for a humanistic approach by focusing on how culture is produced and negotiated through interactions between humans. For this thesis, I use Pratt’s conceptual framework as a means of analyzing the uneven power relationships occurring between individuals from different cultures and the works of visual art produced as a result. In doing so, this paper attempts to locate those negotiations that occurred during these periods, and how they play out in the production of art.

This thesis draws upon literary and visual archival resources in order to critically assess how several U.S. American<sup>1</sup> and European authors and artists have interpreted and conveyed Haitian art and culture for foreign audiences. Additionally, I discuss works of art and literature to make cross-cultural comparisons and counterpoints. The writings of historians help to analyze the history of U.S.-Haiti cultural and diplomatic relations. This thesis engages in history and art history in conjunction with tourism studies in order to gain a clearer perspective on the cultural exchanges that led to international recognition and success of artists participating in the Haitian

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “U.S. American,” rather than simply writing “American,” in order to identify people from the United States and not those who hail from other parts of the Americas. To refer to people from the U.S. as “Americans” without distinguishing nationality privileges a hegemonic discourse in which the U.S. occupies a primary position in the Western Hemisphere. My usage here reflects an intention to disrupt that power structure as well to leave room for other types of Americans and Americas within scholarly discussions.

Renaissance. Interviews are included to illustrate that the climate for tourism and the presence of a non-Haitian buying audience in Haiti led to economically successful art production that followed a Western capitalist model for the Fine Arts.

As the second nation in the Western Hemisphere to win its independence from European powers and the first to do so as a result of an uprising of enslaved Africans, Haiti has an extraordinary status within the Western cultural imagination. For many U.S. Americans, Haiti is an embodiment of the ambivalence found in “primitive otherness”: Haiti’s difference from dominant culture is both menacing and appealing. The Haitian Revolution began in 1791 in the French colony then known as *Saint Domingue*. The ensuing violence and the rupture of hegemonic racial power dynamics of the day frightened white slave owners abroad to such a degree that France, Britain, and the United States avoided diplomatic and commercial relations with the country that was later renamed “Haiti.” Meanwhile, missionaries have long flocked to the country to relieve conditions of poverty and “save” souls, while academics and intellectuals have turned to Haiti as a subject for their writing and research, attracted to the more exceptional characteristics of Haitian culture (i.e. religion, history, folklore, art). Additionally, narratives of despair exist on the other end of this spectrum of foreign interest - food shortages, widespread poverty, environmental calamities, political turmoil, etc., which “attract” the many non-governmental organizations that operate in Haiti today.<sup>2</sup> As such, Haiti has a historical status in which travelers from abroad have found purpose and opportunity in a culture often defined by its image as the ultimate other to the West.

During the U.S. military occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), soldiers conveyed their experiences in Haiti to the U.S. mainland within sensationalized tales written for popular

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<sup>2</sup> North American news articles on Haiti frequently include a version of the phrase “poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.” There are so many organizations currently active in Haiti that it has earned the nickname, “The NGO Republic.” See: Schuller, 2012.

consumption. Novelists wrote tales in which “witchdoctors” and “zombies” were among the stereotypical characters encountered by adventurous white, male soldier-heroes in Haiti, an exotic land full of “primitive” people (e.g. Craige 1933, 1934; Seabrook 1929; Wirkus 1931). These tales, rooted in dominant racial and cultural ideologies of the day, typified portrayals of non-Western cultures for Western audiences who eagerly consumed and circulated novels like Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929) or Wirkus’ *Cannibal Cousins* (1934). In these works, Haitian characters embody the many forms of Primitivist narratives; they are mysterious and dangerous yet also sensual and child-like. Such portrayals of cultural superiority, compounded by the racist attitudes of U.S. military personnel, caused a backlash from many in Haiti and abroad. Cultural stereotypes informed perceptions of “backwards” Haitian culture for authors whose work fed the imaginations of U.S. audiences. By the time of U.S. withdrawal in 1934, tourism was on its way to becoming a major industry in Haiti, setting the stage for the Haitian Renaissance in the following decade.

Primitivist perceptions crystallized during the U.S occupation but took on a more benign expression in the 1940s. After U.S. troops withdrew in 1934 Haitians were no longer seen as the enemy. This benevolent attitude coincided with a cultural trend in the West in which “African” culture became an object of fascination for white audiences. During this period people within the contact zone articulated narratives and discourses that had a huge impact on the way that artistic output was later understood and evaluated. A substantive culture of visual arts production in Haiti coalesced in the years after the U.S. occupation.

The so-called Haitian Renaissance began in the early 1940s. DeWitt Peters, a U.S. American artist and educator “discovered” a group of Haitian folk painters who became involved with the *Centre d’Art*, an institution that Peters founded in Port-au-Prince in 1944 with the



support of the Haitian Government and U.S. State Department. The work of many artists swiftly became famous among Western collectors and audiences and came to stand for “Haitian art,” generally. Early in this period, artists like Hector Hyppolite and Philomé Obin were labeled as Haiti’s “primitive” or “naïve” artists by U.S. American writers like Selden Rodman. Rodman compared them to French “Sunday painters,” like Henri Rousseau, who were untrained in mainstream Western painting techniques and who worked outside of the Academy (Rodman 1948: 8). Contrary to European Primitivism, however, the cultural and racial dimensions of Haitian art embodied the ambivalent qualities of savagery and beauty found in Primitivist narratives used by Westerners in representations of non-European cultures. For example, writers like Rodman were mesmerized by the “unrefined” qualities of the Haitian “primitives” and how they painted as “unself-consciously [sic] as children” (*ibid*: 3). Others like André Breton were fascinated by how Vodou influenced painters like Hector Hyppolite (Breton 2002: 305). For such authors, Haitian “primitive” art represented a counter model to life in Western societies in which artists were indifferent to or unaware of the current trends in Western art and made work that reflected their relationship to Vodou spirituality (Rodman 1988: 10).

Following the examples of LeGrace Benson and other contemporary scholars, I avoid the word “primitive” and its problematic associations and implications when referring to “self-taught” autodidactic artists.<sup>34</sup> This paper uses Benson’s term “Creole” to describe those “artists in Haiti who have not been trained in Western painting techniques. Benson writes, “the designation ‘Creole’ is intended to call to mind historical, sociolinguistic conditions and implies

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. (Benson 1992; Cosentino 1995; Danticat 1998; Sullivan 2012)

<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, the word “primitive” will often appear in quotations when I am referring to others’ usage of the term. Additionally, an important distinction must be made between “primitivist” and “Primitivism.” The former refers to narratives that place the peoples of the world within a hierarchy that privileges those of white, “civilized,” Western cultures and considers the rest to be lacking “civilization.” The latter is used to describe an artistic movement in the West that celebrated the aesthetic qualities of “other” artists, including people from non-Western cultures, those without Western artistic training, and those of different mental capabilities, among others (see: Hiller 1991; Rubin 1984).

no specific aesthetic judgment or artistic style” (Benson 1992: 728). Here Benson attempts to counter the racial and class implications made by use of the term “primitive,” a word used to describe the artists who came from Haiti’s peasant majority and spoke Kréyol (unlike the mixed-race élite minority who mainly spoke French). Additionally, valorizing some artists as primitive marginalized those working within a Modernist European rubric. Benson’s use of the term Creole acknowledges the wide complexities of Haitian culture and nuances any characterization that totalizes Haitian identity into a single term (i.e. “Haitian art”). Artists initially came to the Centre d’Art from all social strata and with varying levels of training in Western fine art. The Creole group, however, caused the greatest sensation among Western audiences. Haitian artists who engaged with European Modernism or abstraction were labeled derivative or untrue to the Haitian creative spirit. Foreign audiences came to expect work from Creole artists that they felt expressed an “authentic” Haitian culture. Similar to the period of U.S. occupation, the “Renaissance” saw culture presented to Western audiences within reductive terms in which Western fears, fantasies, and ideas about cultural authenticity were projected onto the work of Haitian artists.

Looking at the Haitian Renaissance as a “contact zone” helps us reconsider the phrase “renaissance” itself in several important ways. First, it suggests an art historical link or, at the very least, a resonance, between this decade or so of cultural production in Haiti and the period in 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe when Classical culture was “reborn” through the media of painting and sculpture. By making a connection between Haitian artists and those of a particular era of European art production, the terms for the narrative are set: male artist-individuals heroically emerge as talents connected to an intangible aesthetic grace. By designating this period as a rebirth of art and culture in Haiti, many writers have suggested that the Haitian Renaissance

arose from a cultural vacuum.<sup>5</sup> To support this claim, they cite a dearth of archival evidence, concluding that art production had barely existed in Haiti before the 1940s (see Christensen 1975: 65-66). Such observations place the study of cultural production in Haiti within a Western paradigm of Fine Arts.

When I refer to Western Fine Arts I follow the definition provided by Charles Batteux whose description has become dominant in Western aesthetics. He coined the term *beaux-arts* to describe sculpture, painting, music, dance, and poetry (Batteux 1989). In this paper, I also use Fine Art to describe certain considerations in the West regarding the status of artists and the production of applied visual arts. These considerations played a role in the foundation of the Centre d'Art and informed the cultural expectations of those visitors who played a role in the Haitian Renaissance. Additionally, these expectations of what qualifies as Fine Art accounts for their perceived absence of cultural production – without a context in which art schools, museums, galleries, etc. existed, we can see why such perceptions proliferated.

Recently, some scholars have taken an interdisciplinary approach to challenge the notion of an “authentic” Haitian cultural expression that accounts for all complexities of Haitian culture and art.<sup>6</sup> These authors have focused on artistic production such as dance, oral histories, and Vodou as media of knowledge transmission. Understanding the Haitian Renaissance as a contact zone rather than as a “rebirth,” allows us to approach art production in Haiti as a complex network of traditions and modes of visual expression that do not easily fit more ordinary Fine Arts models.

This paper deploys an interdisciplinary approach to address inter-cultural connections that contributed to the Haitian Renaissance. Several authors have analyzed the histories of

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<sup>5</sup> (Christensen 1975; Pataki 1986; Peters 1986; Rodman 1948, 1984, 1988)

<sup>6</sup> E.g. (Brown, 2001; Cosentino 1995; Dayan 1998; McAlister, 2002)

cultural exchange between Haiti and the United States. I discuss the impact of the U.S. Marine occupation of Haiti on both Haitian and U.S. American culture using the work of Brenda Gayle Plummer (1992) and Mary A. Renda (2001), among others. I explore how these authors understand the history of political and cultural exchanges between Haiti and the United States in order to outline the various types of interactions occurring within the contact zone. By discussing the key period of the occupation and the subsequent development of the visual arts in Haiti, I hope to show how a wide range of Primitivist narratives and discourses came to be employed by those discussing Haitian art.

As an analytical framework tourism studies helps us understand the history and development of contemporary art in Haiti, and also describes the movement of bodies across great distances. Writings about tourism help frame the circumstances of cultural exchange during the occupation and the Haitian Renaissance. I use Dean MacCannell's definition of tourists as both sightseers "deployed throughout the world in search of experience," and "one of the best models available for modern-man-in-general" (1976: 1). MacCannell roots his sociological analysis in anthropology, making theoretical connections with Emile Durkheim's approach to "primitive" religions and Claude Lévi-Strauss' views of the isolating effects of modernity (*ibid*: 10). Tourists respond to the alienation of modern Western society through a nostalgic search for authenticity in other cultures. This particular phenomenon defines the impetus for many Western participants in the Haitian Renaissance. For MacCannell, "tourist attractions are analogous to the religious symbolisms of primitive peoples," although, of course, certainly not as understood by the so-called "primitive" peoples themselves (*ibid*).

Many of the North American and European participants in the Haitian Renaissance discussed in this paper would be unlikely to call themselves tourists (just as Haitians would be

highly unlikely to call themselves “primitive”). However, as MacCannell continues, “the touristic critique of tourism is based on a desire to go beyond the other ‘mere’ tourists to a more profound appreciation of society and culture. ... All tourists desire this deeper involvement with society and culture to some degree; it is a basic component of their motivation to travel” (*ibid*). Therefore, this desire to access greater knowledge perceived as absent in Western culture applies to people like soldiers, aid workers and others who would not readily refer to themselves as “tourists.” Additionally, a conventional tourism industry in Haiti has experienced sporadic success. The tourism that fueled the Haitian Renaissance collapsed during the dictatorship of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier (1957-71). While the 1970s saw a resurgence of tourists to Haiti, the country and its people were misidentified as a main source of the AIDS virus in the following decade, causing a panic among foreign visitors who took their vacations elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Not only do MacCannell’s insights provide a theoretical framework for understanding the presence of foreign travelers during the period under investigation here, but we can apply them as a critique of the development of contemporary art history in Haiti.

Scholars like Krista A. Thompson (2006) investigate how tourism contributes to the construction of Western perceptions of other cultures. Thompson demonstrates how images promoting tourism in the Caribbean played a major role in shaping narratives about West Indian cultures for audiences in the U.S. and Europe. She specifically implicates photography’s contribution to the “tropicalization” of Jamaica since tourists consumed constructed representations of a “picturesque” Caribbean. Additionally, Thompson discusses how several African-American artists approached Haiti as subject of inspiration and representation for their work. The images that such visiting artists as William E. Scott produced align closely with those

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<sup>7</sup> The “Four H’s” determined by the Centers of Disease Control to be the first known carriers of the disease were Haitians, hemophiliacs, heroin abusers, and homosexuals. For a thorough examination of why Haiti was singled out as a nationality in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, see: (Farmer 1992).

used by the tourism industry to promote travel to Haiti. Thompson's work helps us identify how discourses of tourism are not solely employed by those promoting travel abroad.

Many individuals who participated in the Haitian Renaissance were themselves visitors to Haiti who would have not likely call themselves tourists. Selden Rodman, an art critic and life-long resident of New Jersey, served for a time as the Centre d'Art's co-director. Rodman made important contributions to the promotion of the visual arts of Haiti and his writings prove foundational to later analysis (1942; 1948; 1984; 1988). Controversial aspects of his work (to be discussed shortly) have made him the target of criticism (See: Plummer 1992: 131-132; Richman 2008: 203–227). Specifically, he ironically defends against artists from being labeled “primitive” while relying on Primitivist narratives himself.

My work contributes to an emerging discourse on Haitian art that has recently emerged in contrast to narratives advanced by writers like Rodman. Many scholars and curators have attempted to deepen the lines of inquiry and complicate the “primitive” label associated with the arts of Haiti. For example, as curator of the exhibition, “Haitian Art” (1978) at the Brooklyn Museum and editor of the accompanying book, Ute Stebich calls upon scholars such as Robert Farris Thompson (1978) as she evaluates the cultural complexities of art in Haiti, and particularly the roles of Vodou, by drawing on several disciplines (Thompson 1978). The organizers of “Haitian Art” sought to bring together multiple perspectives to counter the notion that there was no art in Haiti before the 1940s. The exhibition marked a turning point in the scholarship on Haitian art as writers began to look outside the disciplinary confines of art history as a means for investigation.

More recently, museum exhibitions like “Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou” (1995) and “In Extremis: Life and Death in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Haitian Art” (2012) at the UCLA Fowler Museum (and

curated by Dr. Donald J. Cosentino), have displayed art and visual culture in ways that speak to the complexities of Haitian culture. By demonstrating how Vodou plays powerful roles in the lives and deaths of practitioners, the curators of these and other progressive exhibitions have elevated existing perceptions of Vodou from common realms of fear and racial stereotypes to illuminate dense layers of meaning and interpretation. Additionally, the exhibition organizers have included objects that challenged the fine art/artifact binary, allowing room for a more expansive examination of cultural production in Haiti that is not limited to a Western conception of Fine Art.

This paper examines the Haitian Renaissance through the discourse of tourism studies in order to analyze how a selection of expatriate visitors shaped art production in Haiti. Those visitors exerted economic and intellectual influence in this period, encouraging and creating markets for the work of Creole artists among Western collectors, as well as defining the narratives in which the art was received. By considering the Haitian Renaissance from a standpoint that accounts for the intricate and complex ways in which a variety of individuals interacted (including artists, art dealers, critics, novelists, scholars, journalists, and soldiers), I hope to shed light on how Haitian art came to be defined as such and account for its current status as a circulating set of signifiers that represents “Haiti” to so many people.

## **1. The U.S. Marine Occupation of Haiti**

For both Haiti and the United States, discourses of race, hegemony, and cultural identity culminated during the period of the first U.S. Marine occupation (1915-1934).<sup>8</sup> The invasion of U.S. forces in 1915 resulted in forced interactions between Haitians and foreign soldiers and administrators. In terms of asymmetrical power dynamics that Pratt illustrates in her description of contact zones, U.S. Americans experienced a dominant position from which cross-cultural interactions occurred. This situation allowed U.S. American writers and artists to shape how many in the West viewed Haitian culture, and largely control the representations of Haiti shown to an unfamiliar U.S. public. Works of journalism, art, and literature depicted Haiti as a mysterious and exotic place where one would encounter danger, intrigue, and a superstitious population of “Africans.” Portrayals of Haitian characters tapped into problematic racial, social, and cultural stereotypes of the day. These works contain narratives rooted in dominant discourses that fixed Haiti as a backwards place, “primitive” and in need of the civilizing beneficence of the United States.

In this chapter I will analyze the U.S. occupation of Haiti as a contact zone in which parameters of cultural engagement between Haitian and U.S. American culture were set. Through authors who examine the art, literature, and history of this period, I will show the various ways that Haitian culture came to be defined, by whom, and through what means. Through this analysis, I will demonstrate the cultural effects of the occupation. The Marines turned Haiti into a safe place for foreign travel in the minds of the North American public.

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<sup>8</sup> While this was the largest invading force of U.S. soldiers in Haiti at the time, it was neither the first nor the last; Marines landed on several occasions in the decades prior to 1915 to ensure the safety of U.S. business interests and put down resistance of the local population. In 1994 Bill Clinton sent U.S. Marines to reinstall the exiled, democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide at the seat of power in the country.



Certain writers and artists helped shaped Haiti's appeal for visitors and tourists. By the time of U.S. withdrawal in 1934, tourism was on its way to becoming a major industry in Haiti, setting the stage for the Haitian Renaissance in the following decade.

While the period between 1915 and 1934 is the major focus of this section, it is important to discuss the circumstances that led to invasion and occupation of Haiti. In the century before the first Marines landed in 1915, diplomatic and cultural relations between the United States and Haiti were fraught. During and after the Haitian Revolution (1791- 1804), white U.S. Americans feared uprisings among their own populations of enslaved African descendants. Mindful of the implications that official recognition of Haiti would bring, many politicians in the United States were loath to officially engage with a country borne of a slave revolt (Bellegarde-Smith 2004: 71-72). Before the U.S. Civil War, many officials publicly shunned Haiti yet engaged with that country only as far as U.S. American economic and military interests were concerned (*ibid*). After the Emancipation Proclamation, issues of race and cultural politics continued to underscore relations between the two nations. These issues became especially articulated during the period of U.S. occupation. The intricacies and complexities of the Haitian Revolution, that thirteen-year period between the initial uprisings on *Saint Domingue* and Haitian Independence (1804), are beyond the scope of this paper; however, I will consider a few key aspects that pertain to my later consideration of the U.S. occupation and Haitian Renaissance.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thousands of Africans were enslaved and brought on ships to work the sugarcane fields of the wealthy colony of *Saint Domingue*, as Haiti was known under French colonial rule. A variety of factors contributed to the beginnings of the revolution. Due to the intensity of work required in a sugar plantation economy, plantation owners maximized profits by continuously importing enslaved Africans as

replacements for those who died under the extreme conditions of plantation slavery. As a result of the short life expectancy of a field slave in *Saint Domingue*, the majority of the people with African heritage in *Saint Domingue* were born in Africa rather than on the colony (Popkin 2012: 17; Mintz & Trouillot 95: 135). Additionally, over a half-million enslaved Africans lived in the colony at the time of the revolution compared to 30,000 whites (Bellegarde-Smith 2004: 53). Such a lopsided population, along with the brutality of slave owners and the extreme working conditions on sugar plantations created a volatile environment in which the uprisings in the northern plains of the colony began.

During the summer of 1791, fields, houses and property of slave owners were burned as the revolt took shape, spreading to plantations across the Northern Haitian countryside (Popkin 2012: 37). The mixed-race landowners in *Saint Domingue*, many of them children of white landowners, took advantage of the uprisings while drawing on the rhetoric of equality and liberty advanced in the French Revolution. Despite the egalitarian rhetoric of the French Revolution, many mixed-race men desired the right to own slaves and plantations, having received French educations and identifying more with European culture and values than African (Dubois 2012: 25). These *gens de couleur* sought the same rights to land ownership and political representation as permitted to white-skinned men and joined the slave revolt under a common banner of liberty with the enslaved Africans (Bellegarde-Smith 2004: 57; Popkin 2012: 26-29). Such ambivalent attitudes and contradictions continue to this day, as seen in the history of friction between many elite Haitians (mostly lighter skinned, mixed-race, French educated, French speaking) and the often-disenfranchised majority of the Haitian population (dark skinned, African ancestry, with limited access to education who speak Haitian Kréyol).

Great Britain and Spain joined the conflict in *Saint Domingue* and sought to take advantage of the violence and unrest in order to take control of the once-lucrative French colony (see: Popkin 2012: 62-89). Each nation sent troops and supplies to support whichever side of the conflict was deemed most likely to win. Alliances were formed and then broken, power vacillated between various military leaders, and many thousands of people died from battle, starvation, and disease. Many characters emerged from this complex period of battle, political intrigue, and foreign invasion. The names and lives of many leaders exist both in historical records and as part of Haitian national lore in which myriad figures who fought on the Haitian side have become part of the families of spiritual intercessors, or *lwa*, who form a significant part of Vodou cosmology.<sup>9</sup> After more than a decade of conflict and bloodshed, the Haitian general Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared independence in 1804. He named the new sovereign state, *Ayiti* (Haiti), after the Arawak Taino word for “mountainous” (Bellegarde-Smith 2004: 15).

During the turbulent years of the Haitian Revolution, United States merchants engaged in trade with *Saint Domingue* (Dubois 2012: 137). While many U.S. politicians saw economic opportunity, they avoided direct involvement in the conflict. According to historian Brenda Plummer, the U.S. saw mercantile and military advantages in supplying the conflict but, through the strong protestations from Southern U.S. slaveholding interests, remained distant, cautious of the revolt’s effects on enslaved populations in the United States (Plummer 1992:17; Bellegarde-Smith 2004: 71-72). Ships sailing from U.S. ports, however, continued profitable yet limited trade with the colony. U.S. President Thomas Jefferson saw commerce as a way to disrupt Napoleon’s expansionist intentions in which the French leader would re-establish *Saint Domingue* as a launching point for invasion of the North American continent (Ott 1973: 143;

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<sup>9</sup> Some of these figures include Toussaint L’Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Alexander Pétion, and Henri Christophe, to name the most frequently cited. I will discuss Vodou in more depth below.

Plummer 1992: 19). Jefferson secretly supplied arms and provisions to whichever side opposed France (as alliances often shifted in the conflict), but he was unwilling to become directly entangled in disputes between European powers that were playing out in *Saint Domingue* (Plummer 1992: 18-19).

In the years after gaining independence, Haiti remained economically and culturally isolated from European trading powers, excluded from foreign markets and kept at a diplomatic distance. U.S. merchants engaged in a trade with *Saint Domingue* despite the continuation of slavery back home. Southern U.S. states banned Haitian ships from entering their ports for decades amid fears that enslaved Africans in the United States would take inspiration from the Haitian sovereignty and rise up (Dubois 2012: 141). Unfair trade agreements with larger powers like the U.S., France, and Great Britain allowed those countries to benefit from trade with the new republic while Haiti was unable to compete in international markets. Additionally, the indemnity imposed on Haiti by France contributed most heavily to Haiti's isolation and economic hardship in the early nineteenth century. In 1825, Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer signed an agreement with France that imposed restitutions that required the Haitian government to pay for the loss of property (plantations and slaves) incurred during the revolution in exchange for peaceful relations with and recognition by France (Dubois 2012: 36; Renda 2001: 51). Additionally, Spain and Great Britain put Haiti in debt for those countries' "loss of property" (Plummer 1992: 41). This situation hobbled the Haitian economy for decades to come, politically hamstrung the country internationally, and made it more vulnerable to Western intervention (Renda 2001: 50). Such impositions ensured that Haiti would never return to the wealth experienced under a French sugar plantation economy.

While Haiti's cultural isolation had negative economic consequences, several scholars assert that this period of international isolation was important for the development of the complex system of spiritual practices known as Vodou (see: Leyburn 1980: 141; Mintz & Rolph-Trouillot 1995:139). Haitian Vodou formed within the cultural and physical violence of plantation slavery in *Saint Domingue*. Enslaved Africans were baptized upon arrival according to the laws dictated under the *code noir*, which systematized and structured the institution of slavery in French colonies (Leyburn 1980: 116). These new arrivals merged imposed Catholicism with diverse cultural and spiritual practices brought from their West and Central African homelands. This process of creolization in which the deities, symbols, and rituals of other religions were incorporated into existing spiritual structures, has precedence in the practices of the Fon peoples of West Africa<sup>10</sup> (Cosentino 1995: 29). Scholars like Suzanne Blier (1995) have considered how the incorporation of Catholic objects and imagery existed amongst the Fon and other peoples in West Africa who encountered European missionizing and enslavement (Blier 1995: 78). The *mélange* that took shape under the catastrophic circumstances of plantation slavery in *Saint Domingue*, however, gave rise to a powerful new form.

The tendency towards assemblage, the gathering and placement of disparate objects and images into a meaningful arrangement, manifests itself in many ways in the arts of Haitian Vodou (Cosentino 1995: 39). For those serving the spirits of Vodou, Catholic icons represent both Christian saints and the *lwa*,<sup>11</sup> the deities and spirits of the deceased that enter the bodies of *serviteurs*, or devotees to the spirits, during Vodou ceremonies. Mass-produced chromolithographs featuring depictions of saints spread throughout Haiti and serve as visual templates for the *lwa* in Vodou. For example, an image of Saint Patrick stepping on a snake also

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<sup>10</sup> The word "Vodou," itself comes from the Fon language and is used to describe a pantheon, as well as phenomena of nature. (Blier 1995: 62)

<sup>11</sup> This word describes a variety of groups of spiritual intercessors that form a major part of Vodou practice.

represents Danballah, a powerful *lwa* who often takes the form of a serpent. For *serviteurs*, these images have complex ceremonial purposes layered with meaning, simultaneously representing a particular *lwa*, as well as the depicted saint. This ontological status is characteristic of the inclusiveness of Vodou, in which things are more often “both/and” rather than “neither/nor.” The same can be said of religion in Haiti more generally, where Vodou and Catholicism often coexist and comingle as contributors to diverse belief systems among individual adherents (although the Church has a long history of official opposition to Vodou in Haiti) (Bellegarde-Smith 2004: 31).

Some scholars describe the act of surrogation between *lwa* and saints as a means of subterfuge used to maintain prohibited African spiritual practices under the guise of Catholicism, the legitimate religion of *Saint Domingue* (Métraux 1973: 49; Price-Mars 49, 1983; Popkin 2012: 18). Donald J. Cosentino nuances the assessment that Vodou’s incorporation of Catholicism was only a means of subterfuge employed to conceal the practice of indigenous African spiritual practices. Rather, he states that enslaved Africans received Catholicism in a piecemeal cosmetic fashion that satisfied the most basic stipulations of the *Code Noir*:

Recycling church art has gone on for so long, and is so pervasive, that Vodou now assumes a Catholic face, as do the servitors who for the most part assert their religious identity quite plainly, ‘M se Katolik.’ Such heterodoxy is a source of annoyance to the orthodox, as it is to many scholars... Their attitudes echo the sentiments of St. Domingue colonists who also noted, mostly with anger or mockery, the powerful effects of the missionizing mandated by the Code Noir. The Code rationalized slavery by mandating an evangelization which consisted mostly of songs, incidents from the lives of saints, scraps of the litanies – bits and pieces of Catholicism eagerly adopted by Africans (Cosentino 1995: 36-37).

While images of saints could certainly cover for the *lwa*, the significance of such an act speaks far beyond the context of slavery in *Saint Domingue* and more to Vodou’s habit of creolization. Thus, enslaved Africans folded these fragments and “scraps” of Catholicism into a new dynamic set of beliefs that drew heavily from other sources.

The Catholic Church, which was officially opposed to Vodou and other practices rooted in African traditions, was disempowered in independent Haiti. Church and state were separated according to the Haitian Constitution of 1805. James Leyburn asserts that aspects of the constitution, which allowed divorce and recognition of illegitimate children, alienated the Church (1980: 119). Additionally, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first leader of independent Haiti, maintained authority over the few clergy that remained in Haiti after 1804 to the chagrin of Rome. For over fifty-five years, the Vatican officially refused to recognize Haiti or send priests to the country. Leyburn writes, “the longer the schism endured, the farther the people grew away from the doctrines and practices of a religion in which they had never been firmly grounded.” He adds that by 1860 when the Vatican and Haiti finally reached a concordat, “religion existed during those [previous] years, but it was a strange gallimaufry of Catholicism and folk belief” (*ibid*: 120). In this reading, Leyburn takes a position held by many early scholars on the subject who saw Vodou and Catholicism as two homogeneous systems rather than parts of a dynamic inclusive set of spiritual practices.

In addition to Christian imagery and ritual, practitioners of Vodou in Haiti use the visual vocabulary of freemasonry, incorporating images like the all-seeing eye of God or the skull and crossbones. Donald Cosentino asserts that Freemasonry plays an important and powerful role. Like Churches or the cult of saints, Masonic lodges and their contained images were sources of power to be appropriated by Vodou practitioners (1995: 44-47). Cosentino identifies these acts of assemblage in Vodou as a “process of Creolization,” which he likens to “the process of furnishing a home with imported objects arranged according to the peculiar tastes and needs of the new owner” (*ibid*: 47). As it continues to be practiced today, Vodou altars can include images of American celebrities, international soccer stars, and fictional characters from U.S.

American pop culture. Much like Cosentino describes above, Western cultural signifiers are brought together with indigenous African and Taino religious practices to constitute a fluid, un-centralized spiritual system. According to Cosentino, the assemblage of “disparate stuff” within Vodou, in which a multiplicity of layered meanings are brought together in a scattered system of signifiers, shows how Vodou practitioners constantly negotiate and address cross-cultural influences.

The first three rulers of Haiti, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe, officially opposed rituals and ceremonies related to Vodou and engaged in campaigns of persecution against practitioners. Leyburn writes that this opposition stems from Vodou’s close relationship to revolt and sedition (1980: 139). Vodou’s “quiet Diffusion [*sic*] to all the people and assumption of the form it now exhibits,” did not occur until 1815 (Leyburn 1980: 141). Haiti’s ruling classes often preferred European visual expressions of power. In the early days of the republic, leaders sought to prevent white participation in Haitian society and culture: preventing remaining foreigners from owning property, nullifying all existing French titles and claims, encouraging the execution of French people who remained in the cities, and creating the Haitian flag by removing the white portion of the French standard (Plummer 1992: 7; Heintz 2005: 118). Despite such anti-European gestures, Haitian leaders like Dessalines and Christophe embraced continental signs of authority, including dressing in French uniforms and military regalia, adopting European military tactics, and employing European court painters to make royal portraits and establish art academies modeled on Western academic traditions. Among these was Sir Richards Evans, an English court painter commissioned to make the official portrait of King Henri Christophe (Alexis 2012: 107-124).



Haitian elites have culturally aligned with France and Europe, speaking French, adopting French customs and trends, and being educated, in French schools in Haiti, if not sent abroad for their schooling. Meanwhile the darker-skinned Haitian majority has remained culturally closer to Africa, speaking Haitian Kréyol and practicing Vodou, in which Africa, slavery, and the role of ancestors play major roles. Cosentino makes a strong argument about the dynamic interplay of cultural influences in Vodou manifesting within a heterogeneous Haitian society. Issues of Haitian identity, however, continue to run along racial, economic, and class lines. The cultural negotiations between African and European influences that occurred in Haiti in the nineteenth century foreshadow issues that would come into play during the Haitian Renaissance. These issues also relate to Haiti's diplomatic relations abroad.

Race and ethnicity have long underscored the dynamics between Haiti and the United States. While economics and international trade were major factors in determining the extent of U.S. involvement in the affairs of Haiti, homegrown racial politics often became a factor. In the early nineteenth century, for example, the administration of Abraham Lincoln advocated for large-scale black emigration to Haiti as a means of removing the African-American population from the United States (Plummer 1992: 29). In economic terms, freedmen from the U.S. could be a boon to the skilled Haitian workforce and would create demand for goods from the U.S., Haiti's largest trade partner (*ibid*: 26-29). Many African-Americans saw Haiti as a refuge and the revolution as a source of racial pride as the Haitian government advanced similar narratives to attract black emigrants (*ibid*). Despite encouragement and endorsements from Haitian President Geffrard (1859-1867), projects to settle former enslaved peoples in Haiti met limited success. For example, African-American Episcopal missionary Rev. Theodore Holly, a proponent of emigration, came to Haiti with his family and a group of 2,000 followers to enact a vision of

African-American settlement in the black republic. Holly saw the potential impact of U.S.-born blacks in Haiti who, as he saw it, could have a civilizing effect on the nation, correct its backwards culture and, with time, set it as an exemplar of black self-sufficiency (*ibid*). However, the group encountered hardship: their efforts were met by corrupt government officials, inadequate logistics, and what they viewed as the backward African folk practices of the Haitian people (Heinl 2005: 201). The U.S. Civil War and subsequent Western Expansion marked the end of such colonizing efforts, but Holly returned to Haiti as its first Episcopal bishop in 1871, living there until his death in 1911. Holly's efforts in Haiti and his attitudes about Haitian cultural deficiencies have parallels in the ways many African-Americans approached the country in the early twentieth century, as discussed below.

In the late-nineteenth century, as part of a post-Civil War assertive approach towards global affairs, the United States government increasingly sought ways to extend its influence in Caribbean nations, including Haiti. Since the Haitian government restricted foreign investment and prohibited non-Haitian land-ownership, large private U.S. firms found it difficult to do business in Haiti and control their assets and resources there (Shannon 1996: 4). Additionally, the U.S. sought to extend strategic naval interests in Haiti and the rest of the Caribbean concurrent with the expansion of markets in the Western Hemisphere and Asia (Schmidt 1971: 6). In 1866, Secretary of State William Seward was the first U.S. Secretary of State to visit Haiti (Heinl 2005: 214). Among his many projects, Seward sought to secure a U.S. naval presence in the West Indies and considered the possibility of a base in the Haitian deepwater port of Môle St. Nicholas. The Haitian government sought to capitalize on this interest by offering to trade U.S. naval presence in the harbor for U.S. assumption of the Haitian debt accrued through the French indemnity. Such an action effectively would make Haiti a U.S. protectorate, something Seward

thought the U.S. Senate would reject<sup>12</sup> (Plummer 1992: 52). The U.S. rejected this deal but the Navy remained interested in Môle St. Nicholas for decades to come (Shannon 1996: 16). Such U.S. designs on the harbor likely contributed to the decision to land U.S. Marines in Haiti in 1915.

Before I discuss the broad global circumstances under which the U.S. occupied Haiti, I should say a few words about the term “occupation” itself because in this context it describes much more than a physical possession of space by a dominant group over a subordinate one – it accounts for a particular process of interaction and engagement among individuals. I prefer Mary Renda’s usage in which “occupation” has resonance beyond its usage as a “sum of its participants” and implies the cultural space in which U.S. Americans and Haitians interacted:

While the Occupation was an event, an action, a policy and a structure, it was also an encounter and a process. Its effects arose in part from the fact that it entailed the meeting of two cultures within one geographical space. In this sense, ‘the occupation’ refers to a process that could never be controlled by any one party, by any one man or group of men, not even by the men with authority over the men with guns (Renda 2001: 20).

By this definition, we can understand the U.S. occupation, not in monolithic terms like Haiti vs. the United States, but acknowledge the humanity involved amongst its participants. We can also see how Renda’s description of occupation mirrors Pratt’s definition of the contact zone: both account for complex layers of interaction between individuals from separate cultures meeting in one location. Additionally, the occupation frames the asymmetrical discursive interplay that occurred between individual U.S. Americans and Haitians. I will discuss some of these interpersonal relationships after I describe the broader histories from which the occupation arose; however, both historical context and the cross-cultural interactions in Haiti contributed to the

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<sup>12</sup> Seward’s designs on expanding U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere often ran into Congressional disapproval, with the notable exception being the purchase of Alaska in 1867, also known as “Seward’s Folly.” (Plummer 1992: 50)

dynamic mix of the contact zone and affected the period of arts production that followed the occupation.

Before the occupation, the United States government was concerned with affairs in Haiti to the extent of maintaining economic and military hegemony in the Western Hemisphere and protecting a favorable trade relationship with its Caribbean neighbors. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as the completion of the Panama Canal project loomed and U.S. maritime hegemony became paramount, the U.S. sought to minimize the influence of other European powers in the Caribbean. Like many of its Caribbean neighbors, Haiti was in debt to European powers (see the French indemnity discussed earlier) and therefore subject to foreign influence – a growing concern for the U.S. (Schmidt 1971: 43) Additionally, a sizable German business community had established itself in Haiti that, in light of Germany's belligerent posturing that had led to war in Europe, posed a threat to U.S. regional hegemony. With rising Haitian political instability of this period, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson decided to intervene in Haiti (Shannon 1996: 40). Plummer examines official military records and shows how the occupation directly benefited U.S. interests. For example, National City Bank took over major banking operations formerly controlled by German and European firms; Haitian corporations like the Haitian-American Sugar Company were rid of German management and capital and bought out by banks from New York, Chicago, and Havana (Plummer 1992: 96-100). Additionally, the U.S. oversaw the writing of a new Haitian Constitution in 1918 that lifted the restriction on foreign land ownership in Haiti, easing investment possibilities for U.S. firms (*ibid*: 7; Renda, 2001: 32). Such actions by the U.S. military created an environment in Haiti in which private U.S. interests could flourish and threatening European influences were eliminated.

President Woodrow Wilson also cited the inability of Haitians to self-govern as among the reasons for U.S. invasion in 1915 (Renda 2001: 30). Indeed, many of Wilson's interventionist policies in the Caribbean stemmed from the logic that countries with weak, unstable governments would result in "perennial bondage" to European creditors and, therefore, would be susceptible to Continental influence (Healy 1976: 4). For Haiti, the decades between 1888 and 1915 saw no president complete a full seven-year term; coups, assassinations, and overthrows were the norm (Schmidt 1971: 42). U.S. politicians and military commanders viewed their actions in Haiti as part of a civilizing project to correct a backwards nation populated by a culturally inferior people who could not govern themselves.

Superior cultural and racial attitudes were evident in U.S. American foreign policy of the time, as well. In a 1929 foreign policy essay, one writer framed Haiti's history in terms of cultural inferiority, writing that, after the Haitian Revolution that ended in 1804,

The highways and other public improvements established by the French were allowed to deteriorate and the republic became a largely self-sufficient but backward and ill-governed region in which local development was negligible. The population, fresh from slavery in greater part, was lacking initiative and had had no experience in self-government (Jones 1929: 68).

The U.S. justified intervention in Haiti by claiming that troops were deployed to bring "order out of chaos" and like a stern father show the Haitians how to govern (Renda 2001: 61). The U.S. exercised this logic in military interventions throughout the Caribbean and Latin America as a part of gunboat diplomacy, a foreign policy that saw increased naval action as the Panama Canal was being constructed. As part of gunboat diplomacy, the U.S. navy and marines protected those expanding markets and business interests in nations throughout the Western Hemisphere. By 1900, U.S. marines had intervened eight times in Haiti to protect "American lives and property," albeit on a much smaller scale than the 1915 invasion (*ibid*: 30). The U.S. military enacted this

policy throughout the region many times in this period. In addition to Haiti, the U.S. occupied Cuba in 1898, Panama in 1903, Nicaragua in 1909, and the Dominican Republic in 1916 (Schmidt 1971: 5).

Beyond the primary justifications for occupation - eliminating German influence and stabilizing Haiti's political situation - politicians sold military action in Haiti to the U.S. American public using Progressive Era rhetoric of the day. U.S. policymakers claimed that Haiti had an ineffective and "immature" government that led to political instability. For example, Major Smedley Butler, U.S. commander of the *Gendarmerie d'Haiti*,<sup>13</sup> considered the Haitian people his "wards," trustees for the benefits of occupation (*ibid*: 16). Plummer considers this paternalist attitude the most benign expression of ingrained U.S. American racism (as opposed to the indiscriminate lynching and shooting of Haitian men for sport in the occupation's early years, for example) that informed the occupation. She cites a Marine officer who, boasting of his disciplinary abilities, claimed he "knew the nigger and how to handle him" (Plummer 1992: 108). As for cultural differences between African-Americans and Haitians, the same officer stated that the latter, "are niggers in spite of the thin varnish of education and refinement...down in their hearts they are just the same happy, idle, irresponsible people we know of" (*ibid*). Here we see how U.S. Americans applied homegrown reductive racial logic to a foreign situation in Haiti.

Mary A. Renda investigates the particular strains of paternalist discourses employed by U.S. soldiers and administrators during the occupation of Haiti. She defines paternalism as,

an assertion of authority, superiority, and control expressed in the metaphor of a father's relationship with his children. It was a form of domination, a relation of power, masked as benevolent by its reference to paternal care and guidance, but structured equally by norms of paternal authority and discipline (Renda 2001: 15).

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<sup>13</sup> The *Gendarmerie*, consisting of Haitian soldiers that were trained and led by U.S. officers, was intended to replace all military and police in Haiti. Butler would later be promoted to General (Healy 1976: 210).

In light of the global influence of the United States in this period, she demonstrates how Haiti had a special cultural appeal for U.S. Americans, a place upon which they could negotiate their own cultural issues of race, sexuality, and national identity. To support her arguments, Renda uses archival accounts of individual soldiers, as well as examples of plays, books, and art to show how perceptions of Haiti were shaped for U.S audiences. We can see paternalist narratives at play in editorial cartoons in U.S. newspapers that portrayed Haiti as a petulant and hapless black child requiring the fatherly intervention of Uncle Sam. [fig. 1] Renda states that a paternalist narrative “shaped the conduct” of the occupation but unraveled in acts of violence like public executions and the forced labor of Haitian men (2001: 139). The fiction of a strict but kind overseer often dissolved when soldiers were faced with fears of cannibalism and being flayed alive – sensationalized and racist stereotypes of the behavior of Haitians that manifested during the occupation. Importantly, Renda argues that Haiti was a stage on which ideas about race, sexuality, manhood, and imperialism played out amongst the soldiers and participants of the conflict, as well as the cultural affects felt by those back home in U.S. American cities who experienced Haiti firsthand (*ibid*: 20).

U.S. American soldiers turned their experiences in Haiti into colonialist adventure, presenting Vodou as “voodoo,”<sup>14</sup> a sensationalized interpretation that relied on narratives of cannibalism and black savagery to appeal to U.S. American audiences (*ibid*: 9). Two U.S. American authors, William Seabrook and Faustin Wirkus, each turned their experiences in Haiti during the occupation into successful novels that framed Haiti in exoticized racial terms. Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929) was perhaps the most popular of many stories written about

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<sup>14</sup> A note on etymology: while I prefer the spelling “Vodou” which is used by Cosentino and others and comes from the Fon word, “*vodun*,” “voodoo” is an alternate spelling similar in origin to “hoodoo,” a separate set of practices among African-Americans. I use “voodoo” to describe the colloquial U.S. American usage of the term that only superficially refers to those spiritual practices among Haitians (see: Hurbon 1995).

Haiti by U.S. American men. Wirkus, a Marine stationed in Haiti whose story forms the basis for Seabrook's novel, wrote his own account, *The White King of La Gonave* (1931). These lurid tales featured the adventures of heroic white men, harbingers of civilization that allegedly encountered "zombies," "cannibalism," and "primitive" rituals. Works like *The Magic Island* fed into racial stereotypes and colonial discourses on "primitive" people in which Haitian characters appeared as both innocently naïve and mysteriously dangerous. In Renda's interpretation, the writings of Seabrook and Wirkus succeeded in culturally advancing the imperial project of U.S. occupation (*ibid*: 5). These works were part of the asymmetrical cross-cultural interchange that allowed U.S. Americans to use aspects of Haitian culture to negotiate their own fears and anxieties.

The occupation and its resulting cultural products had a nationalizing effect on Haitians. Many Haitians strongly objected to the foreign military presence and subsequent offensive representations of their culture from authors like Wirkus, Seabrook, and others. Despite ongoing racial and class frictions between many members of the mixed-race élite minority and those of the mostly African-descended majority, individuals in both groups found common cause in protesting U.S. presence in Haiti. The implications of a white-skinned foreign occupying force undermining the sovereignty of a nation born from the revolt of enslaved Africans proved especially repugnant. While many of those in the Haitian élite minority initially welcomed U.S. military intervention in their country, their attitudes began to change for many reasons: the loss of autonomy resulting from U.S. American seizure of public utilities, a suppressed Haitian legislature, and press censorship imposed against any who spoke out against the occupation (Shannon 1996: 37). Additionally, the application of U.S.-borne, dichotomous racism during the occupation subsumed particular Haitian socio-racial nuances within the black/white binary of



U.S. American racial attitudes. To many soldiers and administrators, all Haitians were black and therefore inferior.

Perhaps the most glaring example of colonial behavior was the re-institution of forced labor under the *corvée* system, which had been last used in Haiti in 1864 (Schmidt 1971: 100). Rear Admiral Caperton, commander of U.S. forces in Haiti, ordered the upgrading of existing roads and the construction of new ones; however, no adequate funds existed with which to pay local laborers (Shannon 1996: 39). Major Smedley Butler discovered and revived the 1864 law instituting the *corvée* and used it to allow U.S. officers to conscript Haitian male labor without pay. While the system has antecedents in feudal France, it also has a colonial history: the British used it to build canals in Egypt in the 1880s, for example (Schmidt 1971: 100). For many Haitians, the system was too reminiscent of slavery. Dissatisfaction over the *corvée* led many to join the forces of the *cacos*, the small armed mercenary bands existing throughout Haiti at the time, in opposing the occupation by force (Healy 1976: 20; Shannon 1996: 38). After reports of harsh abuse and exploitation by commanders and growing dissatisfaction with the system among Haitians, the *corvée* was abolished in 1918; however, U.S. American *Gendarmerie* commanders continued to use it illegally in the Haitian countryside, furthering anti-U.S. sentiment among the population (Schmidt 1971: 102).

The occupation caused many changes in how Haitian intellectuals saw their own culture. In light of the offenses brought by foreign occupation, Haitian intellectuals like Jean Price-Mars began to reconsider Haitian cultural identity in service of a new “Haitian nationalism” (Shannon 1992: 38). Magdaline Shannon writes an analysis of the life and work of Price-Mars and shows how the mistreatment of Haitians by U.S. soldiers and the disregard of Haitian political autonomy spurred Price-Mars to return to Haiti from France and speak out against U.S. forces in

1916 (*ibid*). Shannon demonstrates how her subject made important contributions to the social and political development of Haiti during this period. Price-Mars, a dark-skinned writer, journalist, and member of the Haitian Parliament was born into the country's upper class, but sought to bridge social and racial divisions in Haiti. He was a leading figure in a movement that celebrated Haitian folk culture, which many within the Francophile élite considered too African, and therefore unworthy of consideration or study. In lectures, articles, and essays, Price-Mars called for continental-minded Haitians to embrace African aspects of their ancestry and find value in such things as Vodou, the practice of which was a frequent target of "anti-superstition" campaigns by the government and Catholic Church in Haiti (Hurbon 1995: 190). With the publication of his major work, *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle* (1928), Price-Mars evaluated Haiti's folkloric past while addressing a reticent élite audience, whose ingrained social and racial attitudes hindered an embrace of Haitian peasant culture. He encouraged political participation by the lower class Haitian majority and called for revisions to a tax code that heavily favored the wealthy Haitian minority (Shannon 1996: 42). Price-Mars' work is considered foundational to the larger *Négritude* movement, and figures such as Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire have credited him for his contributions to advancing pan-African ideals and celebrating a broad, unified definition of African culture (*ibid*: 177).

The occupation of Haiti also energized Black Nationalist movements in the United States. Reading the negative reports about the abusive behavior of U.S. soldiers in Haiti, and aware of the racial and colonial implications of the occupation, many Harlem-based black intellectuals and artists in the U.S. rallied in support of Haiti's cause. Figures like James Wheldon Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, and Langston Hughes found ideological inspiration in the Haitian resistance to the racist imperialism of the U.S. occupation. James Wheldon Johnson railed against the U.S.

mission, calling for the withdrawal of Marine forces. Through his actions, the NAACP articulated its anti-imperialist stance, politically determined to end the occupation and expose the cruel and racist treatment of the Haitian people at the service of powerful business interests like National City Bank (Renda 2001: 190). Jacob Lawrence drew from the lore of the Haitian Revolution to establish its importance in the lineage of black struggle, producing his Toussaint L'Ouverture series of works on paper in 1937 (Thompson 2007: 76-77). [fig. 2] In his writing, Langston Hughes reframed pejorative narratives used by Marines towards the Haitian people, turning the expression for Haitians as “people without shoes” into a critique of the imperialist project undertaken by the U.S. military: “All the work that kept Haiti alive, paid the interest on American loans, and enriched foreign traders, was done by people without shoes” (Renda 2001: 262).

While artists like Jacob Lawrence received praise for “capturing so well the tropical atmosphere of the island and the emotion of the revolution” in his series of pictures, he never actually traveled to Haiti (Thompson 2007: 76-77). Krista A. Thompson demonstrates the disjuncture between the ideologies of Pan-Africanism and the output of African-American artists who travelled to Haiti during the occupation. While African-American leaders in the U.S. opposed the occupation and supported the cause of Haitian sovereignty, prominent artists and intellectuals often saw Haitians in terms that emphasized their cultural difference from African-Americans, rather than racial solidarity. An African-American painter from Chicago named William Scott came to Haiti in 1931 and spent a year creating and exhibiting a large body of work. Similar to other curious travelers of the day, Scott was motivated to find the “authentic African” qualities present within Haitian culture before they “disappeared.” In Haiti, Scott made a series portraits of Haitians in order to create a visual archive of “50 distinct Negro types.” In

works like *Kenskoff, Haiti* (1931) [fig. 3], Scott catalogued “the types, customs and culture of the self-governing negroes” (*Ibid*: 80). Ironically, Scott’s intention to identify and define racial typologies more closely resembles scientifically legitimized racism and discrimination in Western culture than ideologies surrounding shared African identity. Thompson’s analysis underscores the pervasive perception held by many U.S. Americans, both black and white, that Haitian culture was an extreme example of the exotic primitive “other.”

Scott’s genre scenes also fit into his stated objective to record “Haitian types” and create a taxonomy of Haitian people. He traveled the country searching for scenes that reinforced his impression that: “the natives here have changed but very little from the time their forefathers were brought from Africa” (*ibid*). Works like *Haitian Market* (1950) support Thompson’s position that Scott painted generalized scenes of labor reflecting the daily occupations and “customs” of Haitians in order to define the cultural other (*ibid*: 81). Art historian Harriet G. Warkel writes without irony that *Haitian Market* “captures the crowded atmosphere and inherent exoticism of the island’s markets” (1996: 29). Scott’s work in Haiti is another example of how non-Haitian travelers employed problematic discourses while portraying Haiti for outside audiences. The fact that Scott was African-American adds another level of intrigue and shows that “Haiti” as an idea, could be used for a variety of political purposes and to fit many ideological agendas.

Through Thompson’s writing we can locate William Scott and his painting of Haitian “types” within the broader framework of tourism being promoted elsewhere in the Caribbean during this period. Thompson examines more generally the ways in which the tourism industry promoted and shaped representations of the Caribbean through a process she terms “tropicalization.” She defines this as part of “the complex visual systems through which the

islands were imagined for tourist consumption and the social and political implications of these representations on the actual physical space of the islands and their inhabitants” (Thompson 2006: 5). She argues that cruise ship companies circulated images in North America and the United Kingdom that promoted the picturesque qualities of the Anglophone Caribbean in which the natives were tamed and natural splendor was made abundant. In *Haitian Market*, we can see the ways in which Scott relies on a similar picturesque visual language in his genre scenes in which Caribbean natives are subsumed within an iconography of place.

Within Thompson’s analysis of visual precursors to touristic promotional images of the Caribbean, we see another link to Scott’s taxonomic project. Thompson cites the influence of European naturalists in the nineteenth-century who traveled to the Caribbean in order to depict the “peculiar” natural qualities of the islands for continental audiences. Relying on scientifically rooted visual categorizations, they painted images of exotic flora as part of a Linnaen classification system (*ibid*: 42). Despite such a seemingly rational approach to cataloguing flowers and plants, Thompson uses the example of one artist in particular named Marianne North who writes of how Jamaica lived up to her exotic and fantastical expectations of “eccentric” tropical beauty of which she long dreamt. Thompson asks the important question, “did she focus on ‘tropical’ forms of nature because that was what she anticipated?” (2007: 44)

Images circulated throughout Europe and North America that signified the Caribbean for audiences in those places. Thompson determines that, indeed, such artists “employed certain presentational techniques that often heightened the strangeness of nature in Jamaica: they projected this select vision as typical of nature on the island” by focusing on those predetermined “peculiar” aspects they sought from the outset (*ibid*). Scott employed a similar typology to represent Haitian people as objects of cultural, if not scientific interest. We should ask a similar

question of Scott: was he reifying his own predetermined conception of “authentic” Haitian culture within his paintings? Thompson helps us understand both how particular visual languages were used to shape the perceptions of potential travelers toward touristic ends, as well as identify the feedback loop of circulating images informing such travelers.

We can find parallels in Scott’s work in Haiti to descriptions of the behaviors and motivations of tourists. As stated earlier, MacCannell defines the tourist as both an actual person, a sightseeing visitor in a foreign land, and as a conceptual template for the generalized Western individual (MacCannell 1976: 1). In William Scott’s writings and paintings while in Haiti, we can locate MacCannell’s tourist. As we can see from his earlier statement that he was searching for a supposedly vanishing “authentic” African element within Haitian culture in the 1930s, Scott demonstrated some of the tourist’s anxieties existing in Western society and expressed nostalgia for vanishing forms of labor in his Haitian scenes, major motivators for tourism, according to MacCannell (*ibid*: 91). Additionally, Scott’s project of recording a Haitian typology coincides with MacCannell’s statement that tourists and social scientists share a fascination with the Absolute Other, or “primitive peoples, poor peoples, and ethnic and other minorities,” and suggests that the artist shared this preoccupation (*ibid*: 5). Paintings like *Haitian Market* show Scott’s own scientific fascination with representations of Haitian labor. As MacCannell’s tourist, as both actual traveler and concept, Scott’s presence and actions in Haiti anticipate an alienation that MacCannell describes decades later that comes from reordered social relationships in Western society.

While Thompson shows us problematic aspects of William Scott’s work and his approach to Haiti as a subject, it seems he made quite an impression upon many prominent members of Port-au-Prince society. At the end of his trip, Scott exhibited his resulting body of work at a

private club Port-au-Prince in which many upper class Haitians were members (Thompson 2007: 87). According to one scholar, it was the first one-artist exhibition in Haiti (Christensen 1975: 40). Whether or not this is true (or can be proven), Scott's show generated much excitement. The opening was well attended and guests included Haitian President Stenio Vincent (1930-41), who bought several of Scott's canvasses and presented the artist with official honors (Alexis 2012: 114). Scott himself worried about the reception of his work considering that his subject matter consisted of Haitian peasants, market women, and other representative "types" from Haiti's lower classes, not those who were likely to attend his exhibition. If success can be measured by sales and attendance, Scott's concerns were unfounded. Additionally, Thompson suggests that Scott's timing may have been fortuitous because of growing interest and appreciation in folk culture among Haiti's upper classes at the time (Thompson 2007: 87).<sup>15</sup>

Scott also made important contributions to the arts community during his travels in Haiti. Importantly, he influenced the work of Pétion Savain, a lawyer, novelist, and artist who befriended Scott, shadowed the artist during his time in Haiti, observed his technique, and learned the principles of oil painting (Christensen 1975: 40). Gerald Alexis points out Savain's involvement with the *Groupe du Pont Géraud* in the 1930s, a collective of Haitian intellectuals who responded to Jean-Price Mars' call for a "new Haitian nationalism" and advocated for a reflective reconsideration of the value of Haitian folk culture (Alexis 2012: 114). For his part, Savain published the novel, *La Case de Damballah* (1939), which featured his woodcut illustrations of Vodou ceremonies and other depictions of rural Haitian scenes [fig. 4]. In the book, Savain celebrates Vodou and its strong revolutionary roots, representing it for contemporary audiences as a praiseworthy cultural product, rather than as a source of lurid mystery and fear. Savain also encouraged other artists to depict everyday Haitian life, as well,

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<sup>15</sup> See the discussion of Jean Price-Mars above.

influencing the work of painters like Georges “Geo” Remponneau, who would take a leadership role in the Centre d’Art during the 1940s (Poupeye 1998: 65).

Ethnographers and anthropologists also celebrated and sought to elevate Haitian peasant culture. Figures such as Melville Herskovits, Alfred Métraux, and Harold Courlander worked in Haiti during the occupation, documenting and preserving a peasant culture seen as threatened by outside influence. Works like Herskovitz’s *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937) and Courlander’s *The Drum and the Hoe* (1973) linked the practice of Vodou to their African forebears. Amid official persecution of Vodou, Jacques Roumain opened the *Bureau d’Ethnologie* in Port-au-Prince in 1941, dedicated to the study of Haitian folk culture. Such figures saw Haiti in terms of its perceived “authenticity,” a place where unspoiled African culture thrived; a view which, according to Renda, “underscored stereotypic notions of blacks as closer to nature, and naturally happy, having special access to joy as whites could not” (Renda 2001: 275). This notion of an innate Haitian *joie de vivre* would later inform the reception of Haitian art in the 1940s.

Travel writing in the 1930s parallels the anthropological interest in Haiti during the same period, which articulated a North American desire for the exotic and authentic. Renda finds further evidence of discursive shifts by going through tourism data of the period. Cruise lines began promoting visits to Haiti in the 1930s. Brochures advertising Haitian vacations often used illustrations of King Henri Christophe (1806-20) in full military regalia to advertise cruise packages that included tours to his monumental fortress near Cap Haïtien, the Citadel LaFerriere (*ibid*: 217) [fig. 5]. Images of both the citadel and black kings in European military attire<sup>16</sup> were key visual symbols that signified Haiti to U.S. American audiences. Such images represented an

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<sup>16</sup> Renda points out that such images of royal Africans were tropes in U.S popular culture in this period, appearing in advertisements, fine art (Jacob Lawrence’s *Toussaint* series), and on stage and screen (O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*, 1937)



“idea” of Haiti in particular, whereas the trope of the market woman, as seen in Scott’s work discussed earlier, could be found in generalized depictions of the Caribbean.

In his painting, *The Citadel, Haiti* (1931), William Scott depicted the fortress within one of his “typical” Haitian scenes [fig. 6]. Scott painted wharf workers obscured among the docks in the foreground, again locating Haitians in the context of their labor as with paintings like *Haitian Market*. The focus of the scene is the mountain range rising above the waters of Cap Haïtien. In the very top register, the fortress sits tiny, bathed in light, high in the clouds overhead, tucked away as a marginal detail in a picture whose title would suggest otherwise. Here Scott’s representation of Haiti’s natural beauty subsumes any nationalistic associations with the Citadel, as opposed to artists like Jacob Lawrence who drew on Haiti’s history as a source of pride.

Thompson points out that Scott’s choice of subject matter, including that of *The Citadel, Haiti*, excludes any overt depictions of the U.S. Marine occupation, or anything that might disrupt Scott’s picturesque vision of Haiti. Thompson states that African-American artists who traveled to and worked in Haiti adopted the position of the colonizer by using languages that asserted Haitian cultural difference (Scott’s depiction of “types”) and erasing “the presence of the colonizer in their depiction of place” (Thompson 2007: 88). In *The Citadel, Haiti*, we can see how Scott, by depicting a monument of Haitian national pride in the service of the picturesque, unwittingly employs the same visual strategies as promoters of tourism to Haiti, and omits any trace of contemporary conflicts or issues of the day faced by Haitians. Unlike James Wheldon Johnson or Jacob Lawrence, Scott never stated any political motivations behind his paintings of life in Haiti. Through his art, Scott neither participates in a Pan-African dialogue focused on Haiti nor speaks out against the occupation. However, Thompson shows us how he was a

participant in the circulation of a visual vocabulary rooted in the picturesque, however unwittingly.

Scott's travels and work in Haiti are an example of a trans-national network in which the exchange of ideas occurred between artists and intellectuals within the Atlantic world. Haiti in particular served as currency in this exchange, whether in the service of Black Nationalism or as an "authentic" culture that was seen to be rapidly disappearing. The underlying discourses informing Scott's project exemplify the dynamics of the contact zone, especially during the period of the U.S. occupation, in that we cannot simply reduce Scott's work as hegemonic representations of marginalized cultures; rather, Scott's time in Haiti was informed by complex issues of race, representation, and science. Contextualizing his work in this way shows how he was part of the greater interchange of ideas and discourses occurring in Haiti in this period.

The United States finally withdrew its forces from Haiti in 1935. Public support of the occupation began to wane in the late 1920s in the wake of continuous bad press and U.S. Senate hearings on the occupation that revealed abuses, atrocities and unnecessary shows of force by U.S. forces (Schmidt 1971: 104). Following an incident in Aux Cayes, Haiti in 1929, in which Marines opened fire on a crowd killing twenty-five Haitian demonstrators, politicians and military officials began to seriously consider withdrawal (Plummer 1992: 118). African-American journalists like James Wheldon Johnson had been dutifully reporting on Marine atrocities in Haiti and, as the occupation endured, the U.S. public grew weary. United States foreign policy in this period also shifted away from gunboat diplomacy. President Franklin D. Roosevelt pursued a less hawkish tact under the Good Neighbor Policy, which sought to spread U.S. influence by more subtle means. Good Neighbor gestures included State Department-sponsored teaching programs in the Western Hemisphere, which began in Haiti in 1943 (Dash

1988: 76-77). U.S. officials backed Haitian politicians whose policies conformed to U.S. American interests via diplomatic channels, rather than through military force, resulting in the support of the administration of President Elie Lescot (1941-46). Additionally, the U.S. encouraged the development of a nascent tourism industry in Haiti, surveying possible attractions and sites for hotel construction around the country (*ibid*: 74; Plummer 1992:132). Not only did tourism provide business opportunities for U.S. firms but, as Plummer writes, “the task of acculturation that Marines with bayonets failed to accomplish would be undertaken by tourists with cameras” (Plummer 1992: 134). Perhaps tourism could provide a “softer” way of disciplining Haiti and bringing it in line with a U.S. agenda in the Caribbean.

By the late 1930s, as the U.S. was emerging from the Great Depression, Haiti had increasingly become a draw for U.S. American tourists. Haiti attracted a “sophisticated” set of wealthy urban travelers, usually white, who sought adventure, exoticism and escape from Western convention within the perceived cultural difference that Haiti could provide. Interest in “Black” culture was increasing among more fashionable sets in the U.S. and Europe and Haiti had its own special “African” allure. Importantly, the occupation had made Haiti a safe place to travel in the minds of tourists - tame enough for curious travelers while preserving its “authenticity.” Despite this, Plummer and Renda have shown how consuming audiences continued to perceive Haiti within a Primitivist discourse, drawn to its exotic presence.

Additionally, cultural representations of Haiti for foreign consumption began to shift in the 1930s. While authors like Seabrook helped shape an image of Haiti as a land of witchcraft and cannibalism in the previous decade, the work of intellectuals brought attention to those complexities of Haitian culture once ignored in favor of stereotypical representations. The country became more a place of fascination than derision by the time U.S. troops finally

withdrew in 1934. According to Plummer, literary depictions of Haitians became more humanizing in the latter years of the occupation but authors still clung to earlier Primitivist models. Haitian characters were portrayed as multidimensional yet remained ethnically inferior to whites (Plummer 1992: 27). Plummer extends this view to the behavior of tourists: “While some whites who appreciated black art, music, and culture were motivated by a refined aesthetic sensibility, others simply enjoyed the sensationalism of exploring a socially forbidden realm” (*ibid*: 127-128). For Plummer, the transition from occupation to tourism reflects a lateral perceptive shift between two poles of Primitivist discourse - from Haiti as a place of pre-civilized savagery and danger to a landscape of captivating exoticism.

## **2. The Haitian Renaissance**

The “Haitian Renaissance” is a term used to describe the period in the mid-twentieth century when the work of Haitian artists received attention and praise at an international level. Scholars of the period link this “re-birth” to the 1944 opening of the Centre d’Art in Port-au-Prince. A U.S. American named DeWitt Peters founded the Centre d’Art in collaboration with a prominent group of Haitian artists and intellectuals. He also received the support of the Haitian government and U.S. state department as part of its Good Neighbour Policy, which sought to encourage regional goodwill in the Western Hemisphere and to promote U.S. interests without the aggressive militarism enacted as a part of Gunboat Diplomacy. Peters observed a lack of institutional support for visual artists in Haiti. “Indeed,” he wrote, “as far as I could see there was no art in Haiti. And this seemed to me extraordinary in a country of very great natural beauty, with a clarity of atmosphere comparable to that of southern Italy inhabited by a charming people rich in folklore and tradition” (Peters 1985: 65).

Some writers share Peters’ assessment that this creative period of art production in Haiti occurred from a state of dormant visual culture in which traditions of “Fine Art” did not exist in any type of organized fashion. For example, Selden Rodman praised Haitian artists like Hector Hyppolite as accomplishing “a revolution of the plastic arts in Haiti, which virtually didn’t exist until he appeared on the scene in 1945” (Rodman 1988: 47). Other scholars have challenged this perspective. Eleanor Ingalls Christensen and Ute Stebich account for the perceived absence in Haitian visual culture by considering the record of arts production in Haiti pre-1940s. In this section I will explore how Haiti in the mid-twentieth century was a contact zone in order to problematize the term “renaissance” and account for the complex cultural negotiations between

artists, writers, and buying audiences that led to the success, recognition, and definition of “Haitian art.”

Other figures from outside Haiti also helped shape narratives that praised the role of Peters in “discovering” and organizing artists who came to be labeled the “naïves” or “primitives.” By focusing on the stories of select contributing figures like Peters and Hyppolite and downplaying economic, social, and cultural factors, many writers frame the Haitian Renaissance in terms of individual accomplishment and “discovery.” DeWitt Peters often receives credit as the sole person responsible for the “rebirth” of art in Haiti, and certain authors have discussed his role in heroic terms. They describe Peters as a discoverer whose efforts brought civilizing culture to a place where there was none before. The Centre d’Art certainly was founded largely through the persistent efforts of Peters but many other factors contributed to this period of visual creativity and recognition in Haiti. Before I consider those factors I will discuss Peters and his role in the creation of the Centre d’Art.

DeWitt Clinton Peters, a U.S. American artist from a prominent family, arrived in Haiti in 1943. Peters received instruction in painting from his father and established a career as an artist, studying in France under Fernand Léger and serving as a member of the Art Students’ League in New York (Christensen 1975: 43). Peters volunteered his services to the U.S. government at the start of World War II and, because of his knowledge of French, was assigned as an educator at the U.S. Lycée in Port-au-Prince (Bettelheim 2008: 43). A year passed between Peters’ arrival and the opening ceremony for the Centre d’Art. During this time, Peters became involved with a small group of Haitian intellectuals who were part of *Revue Indigène*, a publication whose founders had heeded Jean Price-Mars’ call for the veneration of Haitian folk culture (Christensen 1975: 40). Peters became associated with the group through Geo

Remponeau, his friend with whom he worked at the Art Students' League in New York. (As mentioned earlier, Remponeau painted under Pétion Savain, the Haitian artist discussed earlier who was heavily inspired by William Scott and his work) (*ibid*: 44). The members of *Revue Indigène* received Peters' idea enthusiastically and gave their blessing to Peters and his envisioned Arts Center. Peters believed that such an institution could foster a collaborative environment for the country's artists and craftspeople who were then working independently and outside of any organizing body. Artists would come together and share ideas under one roof. Additionally, the Centre would also be a place to produce, exhibit, and sell work (Peters 1985: 65).

To pursue his vision, Peters obtained a small advance and free lodging from the proprietor of the Hotel Oloffson, a gathering place for Port-au-Prince's artistic and intellectual set. With gestures of support such as these, Peters began to solicit funds for the center. Eventually, he received backing from the Haitian government through an introduction made by the U.S. Cultural Attaché in Haiti. President Elie Lescot became an enthusiastic supporter of the project after a meeting with Peters in 1943: Lescot secured a former residence to house the Centre d'Art, agreed to have the government pay the rent on the building, and even cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony (Christensen 1975: 45). Lescot did not require creative or administrative control as a condition of his support and, therefore, governmental assistance of the Centre d'Art came without any official interference in the work of its artists (*ibid*). Haitian officials had begun to see the potential benefits of promoting Haitian art and culture in the prior decade. For example, Lescot's predecessor, Stenio Vincent (1930-41) had hoped to attract foreign visitors of "the better class" by using Haitian folk culture as a component of tourism promotion (Plummer 1992: 133). As Plummer states, "international opinion was moving away

from crude racism and,” aided by official promotion of tourism in Haiti, “Western visitors might now enjoy what previously repelled them” (*ibid*: 129). President Vincent capitalized on the changing perceptions of Haiti in the 1930s. As the tourism industry was gaining momentum in the next decade, government support of a cultural center in the capital, just off the main square, coincided with the project to attract “refined” visitors to Haiti who might be willing to spend more tourist dollars.

Once the Centre d’Art opened, it functioned as a studio, exhibition space, and gallery. Peters had no stated ideological or aesthetic agenda other than his goal to encourage the production of the visual arts in Haiti. Peters sought to bring together Haitian artists working in perceived isolation into an environment of artistic exchange but overall, he wanted artists to paint like themselves, in their own styles, and not according to what Peters or others might want. Artists working with the Centre d’Art in its first years came from all classes of Haitian society and with varying degrees of academic training (although conflicts relating to social background and technical skill would become issues of contention later). In a manifesto from the Centre’s founders:

The role of the Centre d’Art in Haiti is not primarily that of a school. From the beginning, its organizers have agreed that there are two kinds of artists in Haiti: those who merely need encouragement and technical assistance in order to express themselves creatively; and those who need definite training in order to develop their talents (Stebich 1978: 14).

Technical assistance came in the form of material support: canvas, paint, brushes, etc. The Centre received funding from the U.S. and Haitian governments and made money through the sale of artwork. In terms of support, Peters would also buy individual paintings from artists who came by the Centre, or send stipends to artists along with promised commissions for future work. The Centre d’Art provided “definite training” in the form of classes taught by Peters and others. Visiting artists from abroad would stay for extended periods leading studio sessions and



providing educational support to artists. For example, Jason Seley, a U.S. American sculptor, was actively involved in the Centre d'Art's early years (Christensen 1975: 50).

In the 1940s, especially after World War II, the Centre d'Art became a destination for many travelers who would buy the work of Haitian artists during their visits to Haiti. Concurrent with the Centre's success, many art galleries opened in the Haitian capital, contributing to the cultural boom of the Haitian Renaissance. Privately owned art galleries like Galerie Monnin opened on the Rue Dessalines (nicknamed the Grand Rue) in Port-au-Prince during this period. A Swiss businessman seeking financial opportunity in Haiti, Roger Monnin emigrated to Haiti in 1947 and joined several other downtown art dealers who opened galleries catering to the sophisticated tastes of tourists at the time. As Gaël Monnin, third generation director of Galerie Monnin (now in Pétionville, in the hills above the Haitian capital) states: “[Haiti during the Renaissance] attracted that elite that wanted adventure mixed with rawness of the culture of Vodou and dance and things like that in a tropical island basically...it just attracted, again, that sophisticated tourism with money power” (Monnin 2013). These “sophisticated” tourists encountered and consumed Haitian culture in art galleries like Galerie Monnin and Centre d'Art, locations that fit the schema of a Western fine art model. Buying the work of Haitian artists in art galleries legitimized the collectors' purchases and elevated Haitian art above the status of vulgar trinkets or tourist souvenirs (rather than, say, purchasing a canvas at a market stall or a roadside stand). “Haitian Renaissance” then, more accurately describes a re-contextualization as provided by the Western gallery model of fine art, rather than the re-birth of Haitian visual culture.

In the Centre d'Art's first years, affiliated artists came from all Haitian social strata and with varying degrees of education in Western fine art. Despite ingrained social divisions in Haiti, Peters was able to create a relatively egalitarian atmosphere for motivated artists, no matter their

background. There are several possible reasons as to why this succeeded in the case of the Centre d'Art. Maybe the enthusiasm generated among Haitian intellectuals caused enough positive attention to attract upper and middle-class artists. Certainly, official support from the Haitian President gave legitimacy to Peters project. Perhaps because Peters, a U.S. American, was exempt from the internal frictions related to class and race in Haiti and his status as a foreigner allowed him to operate an institution like the Centre d'Art with such immediate success. These are issues for a separate study but we do know that initially, Peters preferred to work with those artists who held at least a basic understanding of Western fine art principles. His attitude would later change in regards to self-taught Haitian artists.

In spite of an early catholic embrace of artistic talent at the Centre d'Art, the “renaissance” in Haiti usually refers to the work of the Creole artists and not to those who were working within a Western academic Fine Art tradition. The term “Creole” is used to describe a group of popular painters and sculptors who were “discovered” by Peters. Reflecting on the Centre d'Art's opening exhibition, Peters wrote, “as I look back on it now, it was a pretty pale affair. Not a single popular painting was shown, for none had been offered. But the interest and excitement by the public was manifest and reassuring” (Stebich 1978: 15). These “popular” painters had no formal training in Western academic traditions but had long painted signs, boats, and church interiors before becoming involved with the Centre d'Art. Art production was not absent in Haiti but existed under different qualifying terms. According to the accounts of this period, Peters first encountered the “buried talents” of two “popular” artists, Philomé Obin and Hector Hyppolite, whose lives and work appear in most histories of contemporary Haitian art.

In 1944, a few months after the Centre d'Art opened, Peters received a painting from Philomé Obin, an artist in his early 50s living in the northern city of Cap Haïtien. Obin, who had

recently become aware of Peters and the Centre, submitted a painting featuring a flag-draped Franklin D. Roosevelt receiving alms from heaven (Rodman 1988: 71) [fig. 7]. In this work, the president is rendered small on a flattened background of sky and ocean. He receives a laurel wreath from two winged angels emerging from the clouds under the all-seeing eye of *Gran Met*, the Masonic representation for God. As discussed earlier, the visual language of Freemasonry contributes greatly to the work of many Haitian artists and forms a major part of the visual vocabularies of Vodou (Cosentino 1995: 44). Obin, himself a Freemason, was familiar with these signifiers. Charmed, Peters replied to Obin with five dollars' worth of art supplies, five dollars as payment for the painting, and an encouraging letter to the artist. While Peters initially had been dismissive of artists like Obin, he later described this moment as: "the opening gun of what subsequently and rapidly developed into one of the most extraordinary artistic phenomena of modern times – the discovery of the Haitian primitives" (Peters 1985: 66).

Obin began painting long before his involvement with the Centre d'Art. According to recollections offered to Rodman, he made his first painting in 1919 at the age of seventeen while a student at the Lycée (Rodman 1988: 71). Obin's instructor there, a visiting French painter named M. Berthold, praised him as "a natural master to whom he could teach nothing" (*ibid*).

Rodman acknowledges Obin's early academic training:

Philomé Obin was always proud of his superior education. But fortunately, his apprenticeship to a visiting French drawing master in the twenties had been brief and no lasting damage was done. Either because he forgot what he had been taught during the fallow decades that preceded the opening of the Centre d'Art, or because his pictorial intuition made its own laws, Obin painted like Obin from the moment his first painting was bought; and he was never to deviate from that magical pseudorealism that all Cap-Haïtien artists soon began to emulate in their various ways (*ibid*).

Rodman refers to Obin's prior artistic training dismissively, in order to celebrate the preservation of Obin's perceived creative source: the artist's unspoiled intuition. According to Rodman's

interviews with the artist, Obin painted sporadically for twenty years, working primarily as an administrative clerk around Cap Haitien. He became a Freemason in 1918 and was commissioned to paint panels for a Masonic lodge in the city of Limonade near Cap Haïtien in 1938 (*ibid*: 86). Although the lodge provided sporadic work for Obin as an artist, he was able to support himself with his artwork only after he became involved with the Centre d'Art.<sup>17</sup> With success, Obin's creative output increased accordingly. Peters also charged him with organizing a northern branch of the Centre d'Art in Cap Haitien, where Obin took on students, many from his own family, to teach them his style of brightly colored narrative paintings of Haitian history and everyday life in the north (Christensen 1975: 47).

As a historian in paint, Obin viewed himself as filling an important role in Haitian society: "As I see it, painting should be considered in part like the Holy Book, in this way: by means of painting, that is, a picture, one is able to learn something about the past in every part of the world...and with paint one can leave documents for future generations that writing alone would not provide" (Rodman 1948: 28). In his paintings, Obin depicts scenes populated with figures placed within meticulously painted, highly geometric urban settings where rooftops and walls are rendered as planes of flat color that form the component set-pieces for his diorama-like scenes. Within Obin's structured environments people interact under varied circumstances: official celebrations, market days, and pitched battles, for example [figs. 8, 9 & 10]. He often uses Northern Haiti as his subject by representing landmarks or historical events particular to the region. Significantly, the Haitian Revolution began in the north. According to accepted lore, the legendary Vodou ceremony occurred in the northern woods of *Bois Caiman* that catalyzed the

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<sup>17</sup> Obin describes to Rodman a set of murals commissioned by the Freemasons of Cap-Haitien that he painted in the 1930s, however, their current state is unknown (Rodman 1988 71).

uprisings of enslaved Africans and spread to the rest of the colony.<sup>18</sup> Haiti's north is where Henri Christophe built his monumental citadel which still stands today. Known as *cacos*, the armed Haitian resistance opposing the U.S. occupation made their final stand against the Marines in the northern plains of Haiti in Obin's lifetime. Led by Charlemagne Peralte, the *cacos* withheld the marines for several years, having retreated to northern Haiti until pursuing forces finally captured Peralte in 1919 (Plummer 1992: 105).

As evidenced in his painting *Battle Between the Cacos and the American Marines* (1954) [fig. 10], Obin continuously returned to events of the U.S. occupation as his subject matter, producing many variations of the battles that occurred between the Marines and Haitian rebels in the north.<sup>19</sup> This particular canvas, painted in 1954, features the artist's distinct flattened perspective employed to portray the large groups of fighters skirmishing along a road lined with dense foliage. Christophe's citadel looms far in the background locating the scene within the geography of the north. In the painting, the citadel places the scene geographically and establishes the picture within a greater historical context in which Northern Haiti plays an important role in shaping nationalist narratives. Unlike William Scott's work that shows the citadel as a picturesque visual device and a dramatic feature of the mountainous Haitian landscape, Obin's painting acknowledges a history of resistance, establishing a lineage between the struggles of the Haitian Revolution and the resistance to the U.S. Marine occupation. With people like Selden Rodman promoting his and other Creole artists' work, Obin became a leading figure among Haitian artists in this time.

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<sup>18</sup> I use the word "legendary" as a suggestion to the historical accuracy of this event, the occurrence of which may only exist in Haitian lore. Whether or not such a ceremony ever occurred is of little importance to this paper. I agree with Cosentino who writes of *Bois Caiman*, "that these conjectures may not be historical is a matter of indifference to those who retell the legends. Their narratives are created out of the dialectic between what did happen, and what ought to have happened" (1995: 416). (See also: Popkin 2012:37).

<sup>19</sup> See: (Demme 1997: 38, 59) for reproduced examples of some of Obin's other *Caco* paintings.

Rodman, a playwright, travel writer, art historian, co-director of the Centre d'Art (1949-51), art dealer, and enthusiastic proponent of the Creole artists, typifies the “sophisticated” Western tourist in Haiti. Rodman, a graduate of Yale and active participant in New York’s art and cultural circles of the day, had long been fascinated with Haitian history and culture to a similar extent as James Wheldon Johnson and William Scott before him (although perhaps supporting Haiti had different resonance for Rodman because of his European ancestry). For Rodman, the Haitian Revolution provided a heroic narrative of Black self-determination, and he wrote about Haitian culture as a counter-model to his own experiences of race relations in the United States. In a journal entry from 1941, Rodman wrote, “It was good to see the negro, for a change, living in complete equality with the whites, masters of their own lovely and rich, if poor, country. The pride that Toussaint and Christophe gave them is still theirs” (Rodman, 1941: 245). Additionally, Rodman seemed charmed by Haiti’s non-conformity to Western standards. In a journal entry of the same year, he made declarations on Haitian culture that echo the frustrations expressed by Marine commanders during the occupation although, for Rodman, this was part of what attracted him to Haiti. He writes,

Today, it is permitted – and permissible [sic] – to joke a bit at Haiti’s backwardness. As in Mexico there is evidence that educational and technical seeds fall in fallow soil. The people prefer to work little for a few bananas, soliciting a ‘kob’ here and there for pocket money, than to sacrifice the siesta and the dance for the strenuous life that leads to tractors and plumbing and Picasso and war (*ibid*).

In Rodman’s writings we see the duality of Haiti’s appeal for the sophisticated tourist: venerated and scolded for its “backwards” ways; both an antidote to the alienation of capitalist societies and a case study into the hapless inefficiencies among underdeveloped cultures.

Rodman came to Haiti in 1942 as part of a “Good Neighbor gesture,” on behalf of the U.S. State Department to promote positive cultural relations between the United States and its

neighboring countries (*ibid*: 247). His play, “The Revolutionists: A Tragedy in Three Acts” (1942), a theatrical account of the Haitian Revolution, was being staged in Port-au-Prince. Rodman attended the opening as a cultural ambassador, seated next to President Elie Lescot. Jean Price-Mars was also in attendance who, as Rodman recalls,

Presented me with the Order of Commander of the Haitian Order of Merit and Honor. In my prepared speech of acceptance I interpolated the line, ‘The United States has much to learn from Haiti in the way of race relations.’ There was thunderous applause from the 1500 spectators, especially in the galleries (Rodman 1943: 103).

After military service during World War II, Rodman returned to Haiti often, traveling from his home in New Jersey to Port-au-Prince, where he became heavily involved in the Centre d’Art. Throughout his life Rodman wrote on Haitian art and culture, publishing travel guides and works of art history focused on the Creole artists. Among his activities, he helped persuade Alfred Voegeli, Episcopal Bishop of Haiti, to allow a group of artists affiliated with the Centre d’Art in 1949 to paint monumental murals in the interior of the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Port-au-Prince (Rodman 1988: 103).<sup>20</sup> Rodman’s efforts helped expose the work of Haitian artists to an international audience, as well as shape the discourses in which they were received.

Like other writers, Rodman evaluated the Haitian Renaissance using a narrative of discovery. While he highlighted the achievements of Creole artists, using their individual biographies as evidence of creative independence, Rodman based his analysis on an underlying discourse of authenticity mixed with nostalgia stemming from his disillusionment with contemporary Western art. For Rodman, the Creole artists possessed a keen sense of joy that informed their work and distinguished them from the contemporaneous cultural currents in North America and Europe. He asked,

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<sup>20</sup> The murals were largely destroyed in the 2010 earthquake but several large portions still survive. For an account of the Smithsonian’s post-quake efforts in Haiti, see: (Kurin 2011).

But why [joy] in Haiti of all places? In even the most favored societies today, artists seem to be obsessed with war, poverty, injustice, brutish commercialism, and hedonism; or are so incapable of dealing guiltlessly with these terms that they try to psychoanalyze their incapacities or escape from them entirely. There is no joy in this art, and not even much reflection of the tormented societies in which it is being churned out so painfully. Why is one obliged to turn to Haiti to feel the same sovereign composure that enabled a Piero or a de la Tour, a Titian or a Poussin, a Monet or a Matisse to glory in the immediacies of the here and now without conveying any emotions of regret or fear (*ibid*, 10)?

We see here the terms on which Rodman values the work of the Creole artists: the farther removed an artist from contaminating Western cultural influences, the more in touch he was with an “authentic” mode of artistic expression. Similar to William Scott, Haiti represented for Rodman a counter model to Western society, and a reflection of Rodman’s own cultural misapprehensions. For Rodman, Haitian artists seemed to have access to a form of quasi-spiritual creativity unfettered by cold rationalism.

José Gómez-Sicre, a Cuban art critic and later Chief of the Visual Arts Division of the Pan American Union, was heavily involved with the Centre d’Art in the 1940s and was a key promoter of its artists. DeWitt Peters gave credit to Gómez-Sicre for pushing the work of Philomé Obin and other “popular” artists encountered at the Centre (Christensen 1975: 46). Initially, Peters balked at the Creole artists, privileging those who had trained in Western visual traditions. With Gómez-Sicre’s encouragement, however, and with Obin’s work as an example, Peters and the Centre began to devote more energy to untrained artists and actively look for more such recruits across Haiti, efforts that lead to international recognition of the Centre d’Art.

One such artist was Hector Hyppolite. Peters first observed his work in 1943 painted on the doors of a bar in the town of Mont Ruis, north of Port-au-Prince, although Peters did not meet the artist until later (Peters 1985: 69). Over a year passed before Philippe Thoby-Marcellin, a member of *Revue Indigene*, famous Haitian novelist, and friend of Peters, located the artist living in Saint Marc (Christensen 1975: 46). According to Peters, his friend reported back that



Hyppolite was, “a strange, mystic person with a head of great dignity and beauty, a voodoo [sic] priest.” Later, Peters went to visit the artist and recounts his impressions:

We finally found the miserable little hut that [Hyppolite] lived in with his young mistress and two little orphan girls he had adopted...greeting us with a poised and ceremonial curtsy he told us our visit was no surprise. He had known of it long before from a vision he had had in a dream. Later on we were to have many other examples of this visionary second sight (Peters 1985: 69).

Rodman also wrote of Hyppolite’s discovery and shared Peters’ enthusiasm. In his own account, he mentioned that the bar had a name, *Ici La Renaissance*, which, for Rodman, foreshadowed the artist’s later successes [fig. 11]. Rodman heightened the drama of discovery in his retelling. For example, he further emphasized Hyppolite’s poverty: “[He] made a precarious living by painting houses and occasionally decorating furniture with a brush of chicken feathers” (Rodman 1948: 60). Rodman also seems to embellish certain details of Hyppolite’s “discovery” (an event for which Rodman was not present) and omitted others. Making no mention of Thoby-Marcellin’s role in finding the artist, he elaborated on Hyppolite’s “vision” of Peters, writing that, “he had been apprised by the gods that a man would come from over the seas to buy five of his pictures and that his life would change for the better” (*ibid.*: 61).<sup>21</sup>

Hyppolite moved to Port-au-Prince in 1945 and joined the Centre d’Art’s roster, eventually becoming its most famous artist and, with Peters, the most mentioned figure in discussions of the period. His work struck a different tone than Obin’s orderly, dioramic canvasses. Hyppolite’s brushwork was loose, giving his paintings an energetic and immediate quality. His figures dominate the composition. He applied atmospheric layers of color at the service of enriching the presentation of his subjects, whether human, *lwa*, or something in between. Hyppolite adds decorative details that signify the roles and identities of the portrayed

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<sup>21</sup> Rodman reworks the narrative yet again in *Where Art is Joy* (1988), where he says of Peters’ discovery of Hyppolite, “it had been ordained by the *loas* anyways” (Rodman 1988: 49).

figures: red-and-blue patriotic bunting for the portraits of Haitian political leaders [fig. 12]; or colors, symbols, and objects that identify particular *lwa*. While Obin paid particular attention to rendering architectural details and establishing a specific setting in which his subjects interact, Hyppolite's frontal figures provide the pictorial structure onto which the artist added details, giving his paintings the immediacy of Catholic chromolithographs [fig. 13]. Additionally, a large part of Hyppolite's *oeuvre* relates directly to Vodou, as seen in his depictions of *zombi* being led around by *bocors*,<sup>22</sup> [fig. 14] and portraits of *lwa* hidden among syncretic and layered visual signifiers [fig. 15].

By the time Hyppolite became involved with the Centre d'Art in 1945, international interest in the work of Creole artists had increased significantly among collectors and arts professionals. In 1944, René d'Harnoncourt, Vice President of the Museum of Modern Art of New York, visited the Centre and bought a painting by René Vincent as one of many works by Haitian artists that would be acquired by MoMA over the years (Christensen 1975: 59). Gómez-Sicre arranged for the exhibition "Cuba's Modern Painters" to travel to the Centre d'Art in 1945, after its run at MoMA in New York (Bettelheim 2008: 17). Wifredo Lam, the Cuban artist whose work was included in that exhibition, traveled to Haiti a year later and stayed for four months, frequently visiting the Centre d'Art and having a solo exhibition there (*ibid*: 18). Other foreign artists visited and taught at the Centre d'Art, including U.S. American sculptor Jason Seley and William Calfee - the latter the head of the Art Department at American University (Rodman 1984: 140).

Perhaps the most prominent visitor during this period was André Breton, the leading figure and poet in the French Surrealist movement. He visited Haiti on two separate occasions in 1945 and 1948, for a period of several months at a time (Monosiet 1978: 12). Breton traveled the

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<sup>22</sup> Those who practice Vodou "with the left hand," or who are closely aligned with *Petwo* rites, often to malevolent ends.

country, met with students and government officials, and delivered a famous lecture on Surrealism and politics at the Rex Theater in Port-au-Prince in which he praised the fortitude of the Haitian people and criticized a government that he saw as a client of U.S. interests (Bettelheim 2008: 18).<sup>23</sup> Early in his visits, Breton frequently visited the Centre d'Art and became fascinated with Hector Hyppolite's work. In his book *Surrealism and Painting* Breton dedicated a chapter to Hyppolite in which he describes his first encounter with his paintings at the Centre d'Art. He writes that "[Hyppolite's paintings] 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" (Breton 2002: 308). Breton was especially fascinated by Hyppolite's role as *houngan*, or Vodou priest, and his resulting connection with the spiritual realm. He writes: "it became perfectly clear to me that his whole artistic output manifested a limitless faith in the revelations and practices of the 'voodoo' cult, as well as a quite remarkable aptitude for evoking concrete images of the cult's presiding deities" (*ibid*: 310). Here Breton finds evidence of Hyppolite's authenticity within the latter's otherworldly connections as a Vodou practitioner. For Breton, like many other visitors to Haiti, that country's allure could be located in the close relationship of its people to something wholly "authentic" for which Vodou was often seen as the source.

In 1947, Breton helped organize "An Exhibition of Modern Art from Ecuador, Haiti, and Peru" in Paris with the support of UNESCO (Monosiet 1978: 16). Rodman stated that Hyppolite's work caused a sensation among visitors to the exhibition. Breton then returned to Haiti in 1948 and purchased about a dozen of Hyppolite's canvasses. Breton championed and supported of the work of Creole artists, thereby helping to establish their reputations for North

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<sup>23</sup> Breton's lecture indirectly led to the removal of then-president of Haiti Elie Lescot. The transcript of the lecture was reproduced in a student newspaper in Haiti whose editors were jailed. This resulted in student strikes and the later general strikes that led to Lescot stepping down (Bettelheim 2008: 18).

American and European collecting audiences and bringing legitimacy to the art of non-Western cultures. In the decades after Breton's visits to Haiti, the work of Creole painters and sculptors came to generally signify "Haitian art" and, as a result, creative styles deemed by critics like Breton as wholly original and "authentic," became the templates for Haitian artists who would work in a style closely resembling those established by artists like Hector Hyppolite.

In recent years scholars have questioned the narratives surrounding the Creole artists in the Haitian Renaissance, and especially certain details of Hyppolite's biography. Karen E. Richman proposes that artists like Hyppolite were engaged in mimetic interplay with international consuming audiences (2008). Haitian artists like the Creoles associated with Centre d'Art painted according to the perceived tastes and expectations of foreigners visiting Haiti, who in turn passed off artists' work as "authentic" expressions of Haitian culture. Richman argues that Hyppolite, recognizing his appeal as a mystic, likely exaggerated his own relationship to Vodou for the benefit of figures like Peters and Rodman. In discussing the latter's work, she writes:

In Rodman's prose, Hyppolite becomes a passive receptor of spiritual expression, a shaman possessed by a spirit who is the actual creative power, as opposed to an artist consciously choosing how to use spiritual inspiration (not to mention how to use mimesis of the foreigner's notion of Haitian authenticity) (Richman 2008: 213).

For Richman, Selden Rodman's fascination with the artist's spiritual identity, especially his status as *houngan*, undermined Hyppolite's individual agency and restricted the painter within a Primitivist narrative that portrayed him as a child of nature, one who has special access to a level of spirituality absent in Western culture. As evidence for her claim, Richman points out Hyppolite's contradictory statements in Hyppolite's interviews with Rodman in which the artist simultaneously espouses the inspiration of the *lwa* in his paintings while stating: "I haven't practiced vaudou [sic] for a while...now I'm more an artist than a priest" (Rodman 1948: 68).

Richman provides a cynical interpretation of why Haitian Art was so well-received by Western audiences:

Haitian art was inspired by a market for Americans ‘looking for Strange,’ who readily performed the psycho-symbolic liaison between a North American ‘self’ and an ‘other’ Caribbean nation-state. The artists complied by using creative mimeses of what they thought the North Americans wanted to see. The North Americans consumed the objects, mistaking them for the real thing (Richman 2008: 223).

Richman’s rather negative assertion that artists made work solely in response to the asymmetrical power relationships between themselves and foreigners, however, dismisses wholesale the creative diversity of these artists and reduces the circumstances of the Haitian Renaissance into a binary of power versus powerlessness. Richman’s evaluation fails to acknowledge subtleties and variations in how artists, writers, intellectuals, dealers, and consumers interacted with one another in Haiti in the 1940s, especially if we apply Pratt’s definition of a contact zone to this place and period. Additionally, her statement above implies that the “real thing,” or a pure and authentic Haitian creative expression, actually exists. Instead of complicating and problematizing notions of authenticity, Richman only reinforces them. Indeed, some scholars have recently reexamined and recontextualized the Haitian Renaissance in a more nuanced manner. For example, Michele-Philippe Lerebours, art historian and director of the Musée d’Art Haitienne du College St. Pierre in Port-au-Prince, provides evidence that while Hyppolite was likely not a *houngan*, the artist certainly maintained a close spiritual relationship with the *lwa*, which he represents in his work (Lerebours 2011: 36).

While Richman’s evaluation of the Haitian Renaissance might be flawed in its severity, her consideration of Vodou as a quality to which Western collectors were attracted provides some insight into why certain artists’ work was privileged over others. Those artists working at the Centre d’Art who came from Haiti’s upper classes and whose work reflected education in

Western visual traditions became increasingly dissatisfied with the commercialization of the work of Creole artists. Indeed, Selden Rodman helped found the Haitian Arts Center in New York, a gallery space that showcased the work of self-taught artists and helped solidify the perception that such artists represented the whole of arts production in Haiti (Sullivan 2012: 362). Those with Western academic arts training felt that Creole artists were being exploited as their popularity increased. Christensen notes that, “in being kept ‘naïf,’ the trained artists believed, the untrained artists were being deprived of the opportunity of making the most of their talents – in other words, they were not allowed to become artists in the accepted full sense of the word” (1975: 55). Dissatisfied, many of those artists formed a new arts institution in Port-au-Prince. The *Foyer des Beaux Arts Plastiques*, as it was called, was a gallery and arts space that focused more on Western artistic traditions in painting and sculpture. Notably, Luce Turnier and Lucien Price, two of the earliest members of the Centre d’Art in the previous decade, helped found the Foyer in 1950 (Sullivan 2012: 362). While Turnier and Price received international praise and the attention of curators and collectors, the written histories continue to focus on Peters, the Renaissance, and the accompanying narratives of discovery.

## Conclusion

Through consideration of the scholarship cited in this paper I have shown how the interactions within the contact zones that occurred during both the U.S. occupation of Haiti and the period of the Haitian Renaissance contributed to the visual arts in Haiti, as well as the reception of something called “Haitian art” that was constructed for Western audiences. By relying on the work of Donald J. Cosentino, J. Michael Dash, Brenda Gayle Plummer, Mary A. Renda, Magdaline Shannon, and others in this paper, I hope to have demonstrated some of the ways in which the period of U.S. occupation in Haiti resulted in an intercultural exchange of both bodies and discourses. While issues of race and cultural superiority informed the history of U.S.-Haiti relationships, such concerns became especially salient during the era of occupation and U.S. imperialism. U.S. troops were deployed throughout the world in this era of gunboat diplomacy and their presence in Haiti held particular significance. In the U.S., “Haiti” became a particular signifier for all things exotic, dangerous, and “primitive” during the occupation’s early years. Later on, as U.S. forces prolonged their presence there, Haiti was perceived as a source for cultural authenticity unspoiled by industrialization and Western rational thought.

Within Haiti itself, nationalist identity politics became a major issue as many Haitian intellectuals, with Jean-Price Mars at the forefront, sought to reconcile their own complicated cultural and racial histories with the presence of a foreign occupying force. The works of both William Seabrook and Pétion Savain exemplify the dynamics of cultural negotiation occurring in Haiti and abroad. Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* typified representations of Haiti submitted to Western audiences during the occupation in which old colonial narratives of white heroes and primitive cannibals were put forth. Savain’s *La Case de Damballah* shows how the “New Nationalism” being promoted in Haiti manifested itself in novels and artwork through the praise

of Haitian folk culture. Both novels rely heavily on depictions of Vodou practice in order to make their respective claims on Haitian culture. As the occupation endured and later gave way to the period of Haitian Renaissance, writing and art about Haiti would more closely align with Savain's work; however, as I elaborated upon with the examples of William Scott and Selden Rodman, representations intended to praise Haitian culture often propagated the same historical stereotypes and problematic narratives that authors of such depictions believed they were fighting against. Rodman's example especially shows how narrative tones shifted along the spectrum of primitivism, from Haitians as savage cannibals in the 1920s to the gentle children of nature by his time.

By considering the writings of Eleanor Ingalls Christensen, DeWitt Peters, Selden Rodman, and others, I have shown some of the discursive dynamics at play during the Haitian Renaissance. Hector Hyppolite's case serves as a salient example of how we can consider the ways in which foreign visitors helped shape narratives surrounding this period. Hyppolite died at the height of his career in 1948 at the age of 52. His early death, along with the dramatic narratives advanced by many authors who write about Haitian art, helped establish the painter's legendary reputation. Writings about Hyppolite, Philomé Obin, and other Creole artists help us identify Haiti's allure in the decades after the U.S. marine occupation and locate the discourses being used to define "Haitian" art. As we saw with Breton's writing, for example, the search for "authentic" forms of cultural expression led many Westerners to Haiti. The search for authenticity in non-Western cultures is by no means exclusive to Breton, Rodman, or Scott. In fact, this search is a major factor when considering the phenomenon of tourism. While MacCannell discusses tourism within a context of post-industrial alienation in the West, we can see through the examples of those three aforementioned figures how the traits of MacCannell's



tourist could describe travelers of an earlier period, as well. For example, travelers like Breton remarked on Hyppolite's dreamlike and unsullied painting style and Rodman praised the artist for his artistic expressions of "joy." Meanwhile, we can see how Scott's fascination of Haitian market scenes and racial "types" reflects his desire to catalogue an unadulterated part of culture that he saw as rapidly disappearing. All of these characteristics fall within MacCannell's definition of "tourist."

The "renaissance" that occurred in the 1940s was no cultural rebirth, rather, a recontextualization and reorganization of arts practices that had existed in Haiti for a long time before DeWitt Peters arrived. Before the creation of the Centre d'Art and its resulting global reach, "untrained" artists like Hyppolite and Philomé Obin adorned the interiors and exteriors of buildings and produced art that would be considered "decorative" or "craft" by Western standards. I believe the cultural "rebirth" cited by Peters and others was actually a shift from one context of production to another; from a situation in which people produced "folk" art to one in which artists were valorized and praised for their ability to access a kind of deeper meaning via their art. This latter form required the support of an economic system of art dealers, galleries, museums, and collectors, which the founders of the Centre d'Art helped to create. Additionally, narratives with roots in Primitivism were used to make the work of Creole artists attractive to Western buying audiences. Many of these narratives were developed and circulated extensively during the U.S. occupation of Haiti.

The authors who wrote the major narratives on the Haitian Renaissance fostered a discourse that guaranteed that subsequent generations of visual artists in Haiti would fall short of expectations of collecting audiences in the West. The fresh novelty of the Creole artists and the seeming "rawness" of their work contributed heavily to their success in the collecting market;

however, other artists in Haiti and elsewhere began to copy the styles of those painters to such a degree that “Haitian art” has become synonymous with a particular color palette and a handful of “types” that buyers can expect to encounter. As art historian Edward J. Sullivan writes of the Creole artists, “the forms and colors of their work that made them so attractive to sophisticated collectors... have often devolved into the worst forms of contemporary tourist kitsch sold all over the Caribbean and on cruise ships.” (Sullivan 2012) We see here once again the intertwined relationship between tourism and the arts of Haiti.

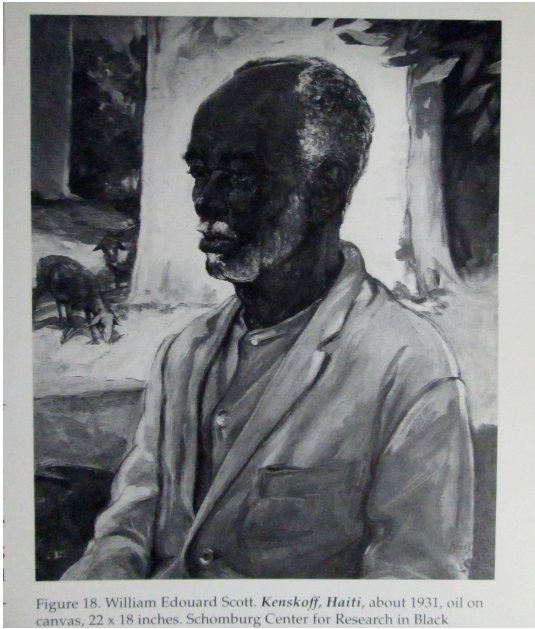
Many other artists in more recent decades have attempted to subvert those established narratives of Primitivism and played on the common visual and representative tropes that have come to define “Haitian art” as such, but those old perceptions linger in much of the literature on the subject. With the help of institutions both in Haiti and abroad, artists have been challenging and re-examining the role of visual art in Haiti and the ways in which cultural identities are formed. While the “sophisticated” tourists of the mid-twentieth century have long since avoided Haiti, travelers continue to make the trip there. In the years since the 2010 earthquake that struck just outside of Port-au-Prince, non-governmental aid workers have made up the majority of the expatriate population living in Haiti. Perhaps this is a new type of humanitarian tourism that draws so many bodies to Haiti. Such a phenomenon and its relationship to visual arts production in Haiti warrant further scholarly exploration.



[fig. 1]



[fig. 2] Jacob Lawrence, *General Toussaint L'Ouverture*, no. 20 from the Toussaint L'Ouverture series, 1937–38. Gouache on paper, 19 x 11 in. Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, AFAC collection c. 2007 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



[fig. 3] William E. Scott, *Kenskoff, Haiti*, 1931, oil on canvas, 22x18 inches. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art and Artifacts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation.



[fig. 4] Petion Savain, illustration from *La Case de Damballah*, 1939.



**Sans Souci**  
and the  
**Citadel LA FERRIERE**  
Palace and Mountain Fortress  
of Haiti's Great Black King  
**HENRI CHRISTOPHE**

(Note a Regular and Exclusive Colombian Line Port of Call)

Many colorful figures live in the history of the Spanish Main, Captain Kidd, Sir Francis Drake, Columbus, Balboa—a glittering parade of discoverers and adventurers, conquering Spaniards, English and American pirates sweep across its pages. Little known but greater than them all was Henri Christophe—the black slave whose indomitable ambition made Haiti into a once great kingdom and Christophe a once great king. The history of the man seems almost fabulous—but his achievements still stand—to see and to touch and to stir the imagination. The Palace of Sans Souci is one—a copy of the Palace of Frederick the Great, whom Christophe admired. It is a graceful feminine structure, standing like a princess lost in a wilderness. The world was searched for precious things to adorn it—paintings, tapestries, crystal and china. It was splendid as only a black man with untold wealth could make it splendid.

In sharp contrast to it is Christophe's own architecture—fearsome, brutally masculine, over-awing—The Citadel La Ferriere. It caps the highest peak in the Antilles, and the blood of the Haitians shed in its building could easily have mixed its mortar. Only an engineer can fully appreciate the magnitude of the task of building this combined palace and fortress. Christophe planned it as an impregnable last resort against invaders. It garrisoned 10,000 soldiers. It bristled with 365 great cannons—but it waited for an enemy that never came.

Nothing in the world is more impressive than this fortress. To reach it, empty-handed and assisted by a tough little native horse, is no little feat. To drag it, as Christophe's men did, piece by piece up a twisting, criss-cross, ribbon of a path seems unbelievable.

It is a sight worth seeing—a sight you will never forget.



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On the steamers "COLOMBIA," "HAITI" and "FANTOISES" all staterooms are equipped with Simmons' beds and all modern improvements; every cabin is outside with two (2) port-holes or windows and amidship, even at the minimum rate. Each room on the sister ships "COLOMBIA" and "HAITI" has Pookah Louvre ventilation, electric fan, telephone, wardrobe,

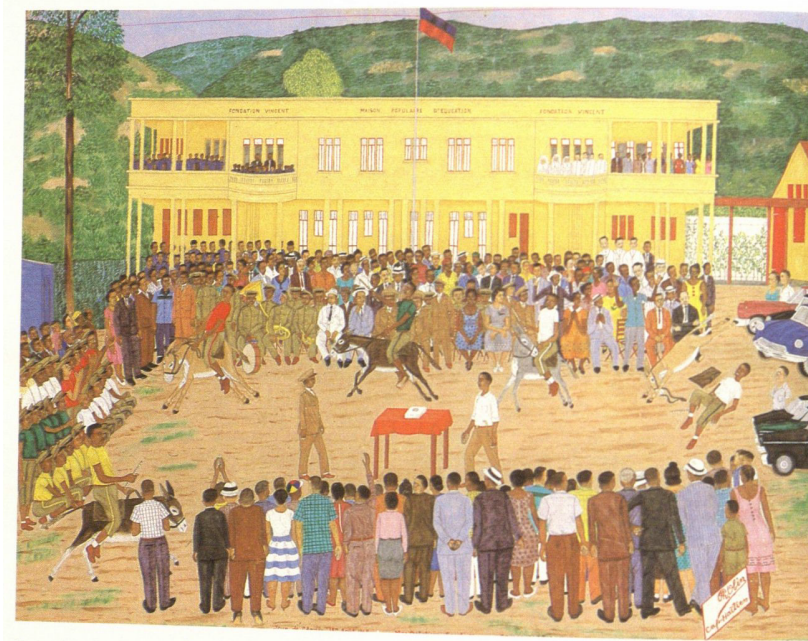
[fig. 5] Colombian Line cruise brochure with images of Citadel La Ferrier, 1940.



[fig. 6] William E. Scott, *The Citadel, Haiti*, 1931. Oil, 18x22 inches  
Collection of James T. Parker.



[fig. 7] Philomé Obin, *Franklin D. Roosevelt Interceding in the Beyond for the Peace of the Americas*, 1946. Private collection.



[fig. 8] Philomé Obin, *Cap-Haïtien Bourgeoisie circa 1900 to 1919*, date unknown.

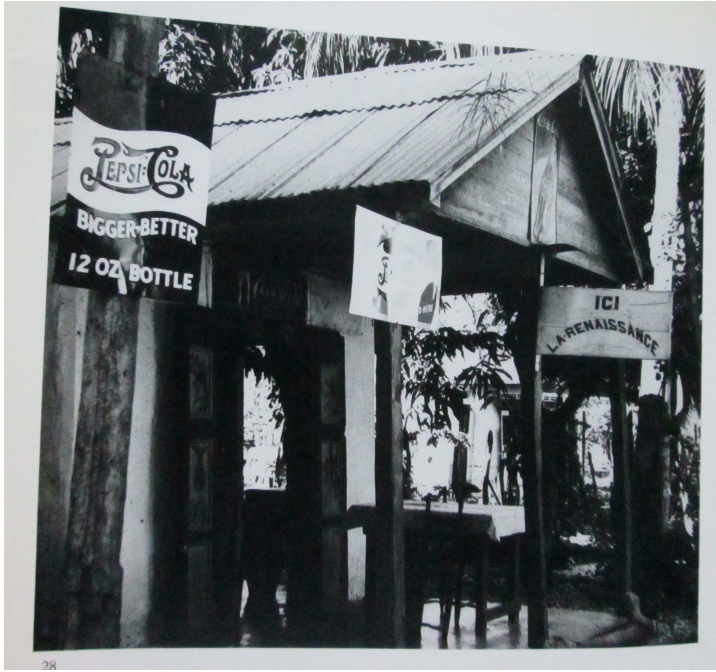




[fig. 9] Philomé Obin, *Title unknown*, date unknown.



[fig. 10] Philomé Obin, *Battle Between the Cacos and the American Marines*, 1914. Collection of Dr. Thomas S. Schultz, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.



[fig. 11] Selden Rodman, *Roadside Bar with Hyppolite's Doors*, 1946.



[fig. 12] Hector Hyppolite, *Henri Christophe*, 1946. Collection Mr. & Mrs. Georges Nader, Jr.

*Henri Christophe*  
ca. 1946, Huile sur planche synthétique, 76 x 61 cm  
Collection M. et Mme Georges Nader Jr





[fig. 13] Chromolithograph of St. Patrick.



[fig. 14.] Hector Hyppolite,  
*Flight of Zombies*, date  
unknown.

*Vol de zombies*  
Huile sur carton, 66 x 81 cm  
Collection Musée d'Art haïtien



[fig. 15] Hector Hyppolite, *The Duration of Love*, 1948.

*La Dauration l'amour*  
1946-1948, Huile sur toile, 74,93 x 59,69 cm  
© Milwaukee Art Museum

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