

The Fight for Freedom & Liberty

The Haitian Revolution and the notions of freedom and liberty that it evokes lie at the heart of many paintings in this exhibition. By the late 1700s, the French colony of Saint-Domingue (as Haiti was known before independence) was home to more than 500,000 enslaved people—more than 90 percent of the total population. These slaves toiled on the sugar and coffee plantations that made France a wealthy player in the emerging global economy. By 1791, however, “freedom fever” spread to these plantations, and over the course of the next decade more than 20,000 Maroons (run-away slaves) would form a revolutionary army to fight the French, often armed with little but machetes.

In November 1803, the victorious Maroons successfully expelled French colonists from Saint-Domingue. They declared their independence on January 1, 1804, and renamed their nation Haiti, a word meaning “mountainous land” in Taíno, the language spoken by the Indigenous people of Haiti at the time of European contact. Historians believe that it was the fastest and most successful slave revolt in world history.

The revolution not only established Haiti as the first Black Republic, it also affected the United States in lasting ways. Most immediately, the loss of Saint-Domingue forced Napoleon to sell France’s major American holding—the Louisiana Territory—to then President Thomas Jefferson. In this way, the Haitian Revolution was immeasurably beneficial for the United States and defined much of its current geographic boundaries. It also resulted in the migration of thousands of Haitians to the United States, leading to the shared cultural connections that continue to link the two nations today.

Women as Leaders, Women of Liberty

The Creole term *poto mitan*, or “central pole,” often describes the position and role of women in Haitian society. A common proverb, for instance, claims “*fanm se poto mitan peyi Dayiti*,” or, women are the pillars of Haitian society. In the Vodou religion, *poto mitan* refers to the column that stands in the middle of the temple as the architectural element that supports the structure and serves as the site of ritual and a symbolic link with femininity. Conceptualizing women as *poto mitan* accentuates their fundamental role in Haitian culture and society and forces them to be strong in the face of adversity, inequality, and injustice.

Somewhat paradoxically, this role as *poto mitan* has also stripped women of their agency and relegated them to serve as guardians of memory and tradition. Women have always been at the forefront of the fight for freedom and justice in Haiti. Before Europeans arrived to colonize the island of Hispaniola—which is today made up of the Dominican Republic in the east and Haiti in the west—the native Taíno people thrived under the leadership of Queen Anacaona (1474–1503), and centuries later Marie-Jeanne Lamartinierre fiercely fought the French at the Battle of Vertières to help establish the first Black Republic. However, mainstream historical accounts often erase these women’s names and contributions. Through his portraits, Ulrick Jean-Pierre reinserts these unsung heroes and forgotten women into Haiti’s historical narrative.

Other paintings in this section pay homage to the talented women who toil daily to keep Haiti afloat through their work as market vendors, washers, teachers, doctors, engineers, mothers, singers, and community activists. These women are working to change the status quo and create a more just and equitable society.

Migration

As early as the 15th century, global forces such as colonial expansion and the transatlantic slave trade resulted in the complex circulation of people, ideas, practices, and beliefs around the world. The ties that bind Haiti to the United States emerge from these larger currents, as people migrated between the two countries.

At the height of the Haitian Revolution in the late 18th century, at least 15,000 refugees from Saint-Domingue (as Haiti was known before independence) arrived in major seaports around the United States, from New York to New Orleans, Philadelphia to Charleston. By the early 19th century, people of African descent living in the United States also began moving to Haiti. Collectively, these migrations led to shared cultural connections, as many of these immigrants, such as John James Audubon and Jean-Baptiste Pointe du Sable, whose portraits appear to your right, helped shape American history.

Through his paintings, Ulrick Jean-Pierre—an immigrant and migrant—draws out these connections, especially as they existed between Haiti and New Orleans, his two homes and sources of inspiration.

Religion & Spirituality

There is a common saying that Haiti is 60 percent Catholic, 40 percent Protestant, and 100 percent Vodou. The word Vodou means “spirit” in Fon, a language spoken in West Africa. Born out of slavery, Vodou refers to a religion that embodies elements and symbolism from a variety of West African cultures, Native Caribbean Taíno beliefs, and Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism. It is often misunderstood and confused with “black magic.” Various spellings Vodun, Vodou, Vaudou, Vodoun, or Voodoo, scholars of Haitian culture prefer the term Vodou to differentiate it from the anglicized and stereotypical spelling *Voodoo*, which is often represented negatively.

In the Vodou religion, the supreme god Bondye (which means “good god” in Haitian Creole) does not interfere in human affairs. Rather, there are spirits called *lwas* that govern all aspects of life and help humans navigate everyday challenges. Vodou is remarkable for the fluid ways that gender roles play out, especially in a highly patriarchal country like Haiti. For instance, *manbo* (women priestesses) wield the same power as men, and during a Vodou ceremony, a male can be possessed by a female spirit and vice-versa.

Vodou inspires many Haitian artists because it constitutes an integral part of Haiti’s history, culture, and soul. Many of the artists featured in this exhibition use elements of the Vodou religion to represent their vision of the world.