

Religion + Vodou

Exploration Card ★ Haitian Gallery ★ Exploration Card ★ Haitian Gallery ★ Exploration Card

Find and Look

Recall of the Dead

Rigaud Benoit

Saying goodbye to people we love when they leave this life is never easy. In the Vodou religion, the ritual **wete mò nan dlo [WAY-tay moh nan dalow]** (recall of the dead) helps families reconnect with a loved one who has passed away. The ritual is performed one year and one day after the person's death.

Rigaud Benoit's painting portrays this ritual in a small cemetery near the river. A group of religious devotees and two drummers have gathered around a sacred tree. An **houngan [OON-gunh]** (priest) leads the ceremony with a ritual **ason [AH-sown]** (rattle). He stands before several mystic **govi [GOH-vee]** (pots). In the river, we see five shadowy figures. They are spirits of the deceased residing in Afrik-Ginen, a reimagined Africa as both homeland and ancestral world under the water.

During the ceremony, the spirits of the dead are recalled, spiritually nourished, and newly housed inside the mystic pots. Like urns that hold the ashes of loved ones, the pots will reside on family altars. In this way, Vodou devotees honor ancestral legacies and welcome their loved ones' spirits back into the family home.

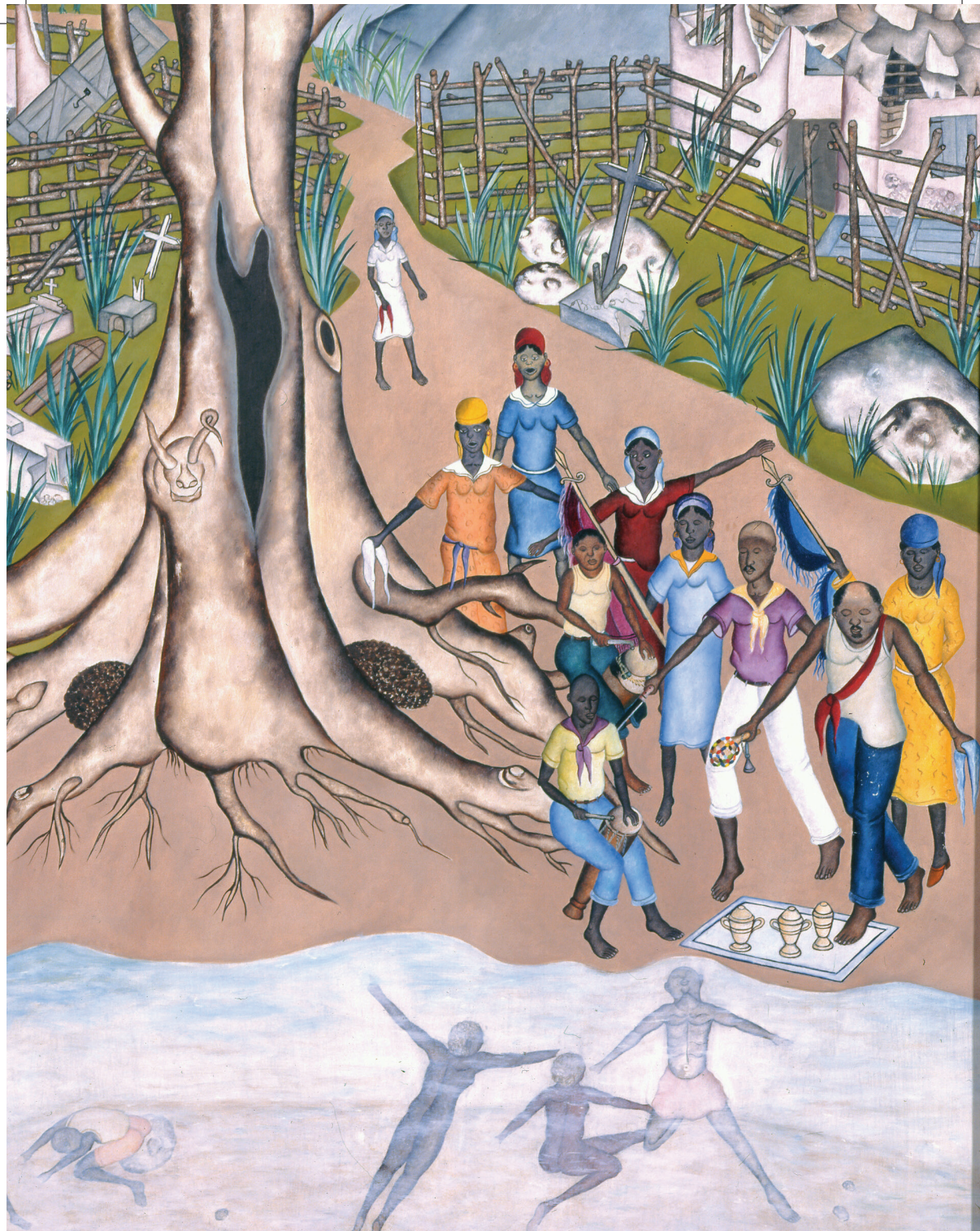
Discuss together

How do you stay connected to people important to you who have passed away?

Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know

Vodou [VOH-doo]

A religion that believes in one God, many spirits, and understands that every person and thing is sacred.



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Rigaud Benoit (Haitian, 1911–1986), *Recall of the Dead*, 1973 (detail). Oil on Masonite. 30 1/2 × 24 in.
(77.47 × 60.96 cm). Gift of Richard and Erna Flagg, M1991.114. Photo by Efraim Lev-er

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Religion + Vodou

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Find and Look

Baron La Croix

André Pierre

André Pierre's painting features two important visual symbols in the Vodou religion: the cross, and the **lwa [LUHwah]** (Vodou spirit) Bawon LaKwa, or Baron of the Cross.

Bawon LaKwa wears a tall top hat and sharp tuxedo in his signature colors of black, white, and purple. Several brooches on his jacket, and the five-pointed star on his hat, signal that he is a member of the Black Freemasons.

Similar to a club, Freemason guilds traditionally only permitted men. Many male Vodou devotees are Freemasons. A man of knowledge, Bawon LaKwa holds a book of **vèvè [veh-veh]** (sacred symbols) tucked under his arm.

The large wooden cross identifies Bawon LaKwa as the protector of the cemetery and lord of the dead. Today in Haiti, the cross represents the nation's multiple religions. An iconic symbol of Christianity, the cross is also an ancient Kongo form from Central Africa. It illustrates a connection between the living and the spiritual realm.

Keep looking!

You just took a closer look at the figure in this painting. Now take a close look at the background. What do you see? Why do you think André Pierre painted these details?

Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know

LaKwa / La Croix [LAH Kwah]

LaKwa is the spelling in Haitian Kreyòl, the language understood by most people living in Haiti today.



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André Pierre (Haitian, 1914–2005), *Baron La Croix*, 1973 (detail). Oil on Masonite. 35 × 23 in
(88.9 × 58.42 cm). Gift of Richard and Erna Flagg, M1991.148. Photo by Efraim Lev-er

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Diaspora

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Find and Look

Self-Portrait in Carnival Costume

Wilson Bigaud

Haitian **kanaval (carnival)** is a season of joyous festivities, religious symbolism, and political activism. Carnival masqueraders wear fanciful clothing to express their cultural identity or become someone else entirely.

In this self-portrait, Wilson Bigaud wears a brightly colored outfit of face paint, gold jewelry, a feather headdress, a shield, and a tomahawk staff. The Taíno people are celebrated in Haitian kanaval as the original inhabitants of **Ayiti (Haiti)**. But Bigaud's clothing seems imagined and inspired by Plains Native American garb from the midwestern United States.

Suits like these are also found in New Orleans, Louisiana, during the carnival festival known as Mardi Gras. Since the 1880s, the Mardi Gras Indians have celebrated the solidarity of Indigenous and Black communities. Like Haiti, New Orleans is home to many people whose ancestors were forcibly displaced from Africa and arrived on lands of displaced Indigenous peoples.

Although we do not know what inspired Bigaud to make his suit look as it does, it reflects the influence of the global world around him: Indigenous, African, and American.

Can you find these details in the clothing?

- ★ Two snakes
- ★ Two stars
- ★ A face
- ★ A dragonfly
- ★ Peacock feathers

Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know

diaspora [dy-ASP-or-ah]

A group of people who no longer live in their original homeland but continue to maintain their community and culture.



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Wilson Bigaud (Haitian, 1931–2010), *Self-Portrait in Carnival Costume, 1958 (detail)*. Oil on Masonite.
47 7/8 × 16 in. (121.6 × 40.64 cm). Gift of Richard and Erna Flagg, M1978.122. Photo by Efraim Lev-er

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Materials + Style

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Find and Look

Vodun Flag (Danbala)

In the Vodou religion, ritual **drapo [DRAH-poh]** (flags) are danced in ceremonies to honor the spirits who protect the spiritual community. Historically, different colored cloths were sewn together to make the flags. Devotees began decorating them with sequins and seed beads in the mid-20th century.

This ritual drapo honors the divine couple Danbala (the green serpent) and Ayida Wèdo (the rainbow serpent, in purple here). The staffs before them recall canes used by the elder spirits. They appear to stand on a **pe [peh]** (a small pedestal altar).

In the top left and bottom right corners are two 8-pointed stars. These represent **pwen [puhWENH]**, mystic points of power. They are **vèvè [veh-veh]** (sacred symbols) used during ceremonies to call spirits. In the top right and bottom left corners are two sets of intersecting v's. These represent the **lwa [LUHwah]** (Vodou spirit) Ayizan, mistress of initiation. This flag was likely made for the ritual rites of becoming a Vodou devotee.

The gold sequins and white and purple striped border add more colorful flare to the eye-catching drapo. Some scholars call this flare “the flash of the spirit.”

Symbol search

Haitian artists used recognizable symbols so viewers would understand their artwork's meaning. Can you find other artworks in this gallery with the symbols you see in this flag?

Words to know ★ Words to know ★ Words to know ★ Words to know ★ Words to know

Ayida Wèdo [Ah-YEE-dah Weh-DOH] **Ayizan [Ah-YEE-zunh]** **Danbala [Dunh-BAH-lah]**



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Haitian, *Vodun Flag* (Danbala), 20th century (detail). Sequins and beads on cloth. 29 x 24 1/2 in.
(73.66 x 62.23 cm). Gift of Richard and Erna Flagg, M1991.177. Photo by Efraim Lev-er

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Find and Look

Danbala

Georges Liautaud

This artwork is made of hammered steel. After the U.S. Marine occupation of Haiti (1915–1934), American soldiers left behind many empty steel oil drums. In Trinidad and Tobago and other Caribbean nations, these canisters were converted into musical instruments, such as steel pan drums. In Haiti, they were repurposed as visual art.

The metalworker Georges Liautaud was an innovator in this artistic medium. He **forged** exquisite sculptures with **smelting** tools. With his sculpture of Danbala, he created the stirring motion of a serpent from metal. The wise paternal **Iwa [LUHwah]** (Vodou spirit) is often regarded as elderly and gender fluid, having both male and female qualities.

Same and different

Other works in this gallery were created from steel oil drums. How are they similar to this sculpture? How are they different?

Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know

forge

To form something (such as metal) by heating and hammering.

smelting

Melting metal to make something new.



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Georges Liautaud (Haitian, 1899–1991), *Danbala*, ca. 1959 (detail). Cut and forged metal.
26 1/8 × 12 3/8 in. (66.36 × 31.43 cm). Gift of Richard and Erna Flagg, M1991.168. Photo by Efraim Lev-er

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Collection Connection

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Richard and Erna Flagg always loved art and started their collection when they lived in Germany in the 1930s. After the devastation of World War II and tremendous hardship of family separation and internment during the European Holocaust, they successfully reunited and sought safety in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The Flaggs began collecting art again, creating one of the greatest collections of 20th-century Haitian art in the country. On this card, Haitian American illustrator Rocky Cotard shows the Flaggs standing in a loving embrace before Sènèque Obin's *Masonic Funeral*. Though their faces are not visible, we sense their admiring gaze.

In 1991, the Flaggs gifted their collection to the Milwaukee Art Museum, sharing their love of Haitian art and artists with the city they called "home."

Reflecting on Collecting

I like to collect _____

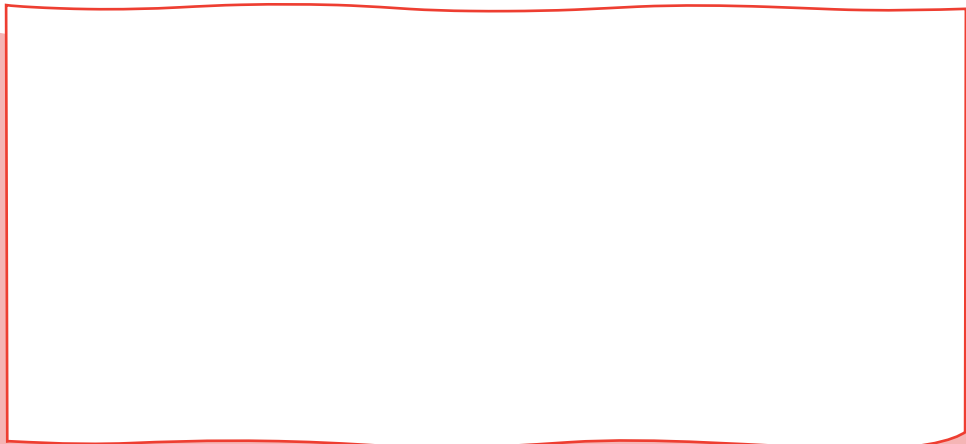
I have been collecting for _____ years

An interesting fact about my collection is _____

An object I would like to add to my collection is _____

My favorite artwork from the Flaggs' collection is _____

Sketch an object from your collection





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Portrait of the Flaggs by Rocky Cotard, 2025

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Haitian History

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On August 14, 1791, a political and religious gathering was held in Bwa Kayiman, a sacred grove in northern Haiti. Participants included enslaved Africans and free maroons. Together, they pledged an oath to their spirits to fight for freedom until death.

Illustrator Rocky Cotard portrays this nighttime ceremony as a diverse group, and at center are two significant revolutionary leaders: Dutty Boukman, an enslaved Muslim man originally from Senegambia, and Cécile Fatiman, a Creole priestess of Haiti. Women served as one third of Haiti's revolutionary army. A week after this gathering, on August 22, 1791, African descendants launched the first organized rebellion to establish an independent, Black-led nation in the Americas, making Haiti a symbol of Pan-African freedom.

Find: *Petwo Ceremony Commemorating Bwa Kayiman* by Castera Bazile

This painting shows a **commemoration** of Bwa Kayiman over 150 years later. To commemorate something means to remember and show respect for what happened. The artist shows a Petwo ceremony, a ritual that sparked the Haitian Revolution. Part of this ritual included a Vodou priestess offering a black pig, which has been prayed over in a manner similar to Kosher and Halal traditions. This offering will be used to visit the spirits (lwa) and the community.

Discuss together:

Why is it important to commemorate moments in history?

Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know

Maroon

Maroon: in the Americas, usually of African descent, who escaped slavery and joined a hidden and self-governing community with other formerly enslaved people.



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Bwa Kayiman Ceremony by Rocky Cotard, 2025

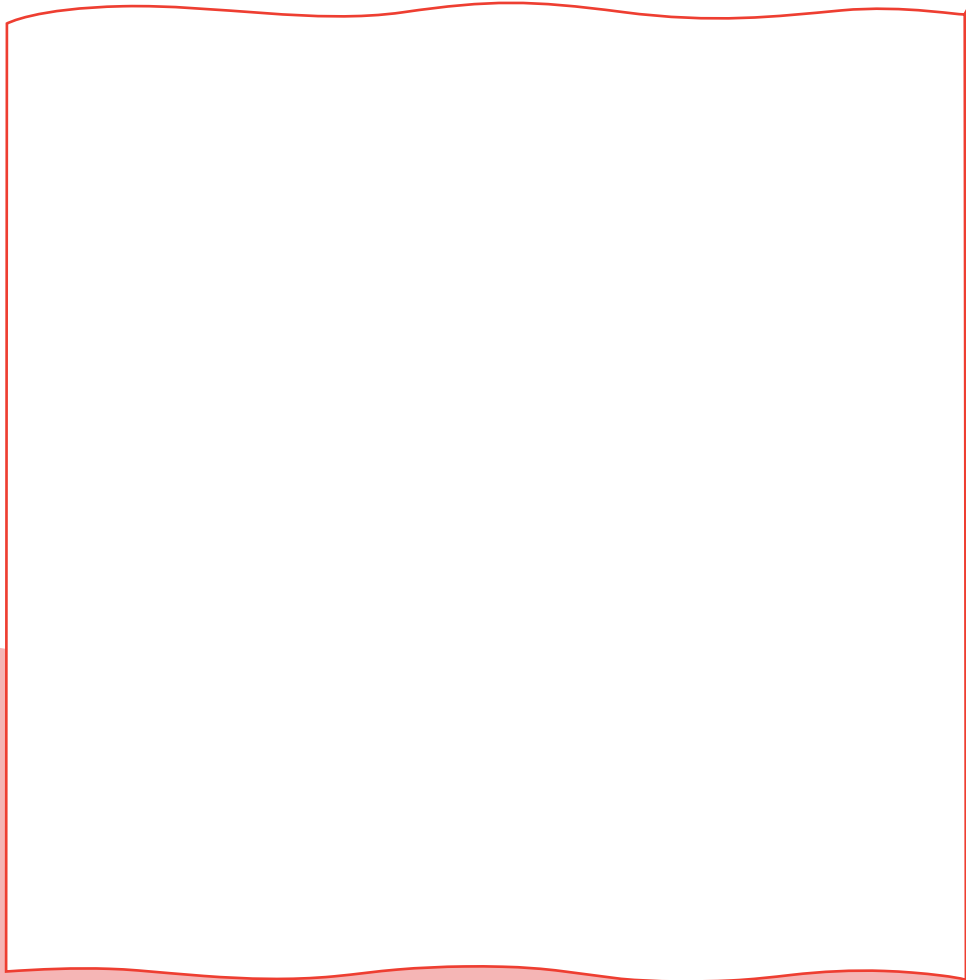
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Collection Connection

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The Flaggs were interested in other types of art, including German Renaissance clocks. The two types of artwork were displayed together in their home. Illustrator Rocky Cotard imagines what that might have looked like.

Create your own collection! Choose your favorite artwork from the Haitian collection and draw it below. Then find gallery S101 and choose your favorite clock to draw.



Add more details! What kind of table, furniture, and other items would be near your collection?



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