



Sequined flags depict Haitian Vodou spirits February 7, 2019

NEW ORLEANS—Fourteen beach-towel-sized flags covered in glittering sequins to evoke the Haitian Vodou spirits called "lwa"—each flag an explosion of color and light—hang in the Great Hall at the New Orleans Museum of Art.



Margot Wittig of Starnberg, Germany, foreground, and Amanda Fleury of Gretna, La., look at giant-sized sequined Vodou flags at the New Orleans Museum of Art on Wednesday, Jan. 30, 2018. The exhibit of work by Louisiana artist Tina Girouard and many Haitian bead artists at a studio in Haiti is titled "Bondye: Between and Beyond" and runs through June 16, 2019. (AP Photo/Janet McConnaughey)

The exhibit of flags designed and created by Louisiana artist Tina Girouard and sequin artists in Haiti runs through June 16. It was timed to start during the season leading up to Mardi Gras to highlight New Orleans' ties to Haiti.

"When you walk in the Great Hall you see all the color, the vibrance, the beadwork. Many people, when they see it instantly make a connection to the Mardi Gras Indians" and the beaded panels in their bright costumes, said Nicolas Brierre Aziz, co-curator of the exhibition.

About 12,000 white planters, former slaves and free people of color came to New Orleans during and after Haiti's 12-year revolution, which began in 1791, Aziz said.

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They doubled the city's population, and their influences include Creole cottages and cuisine, and New Orleans second-line parades, in which large groups of singing, dancing onlookers follow musicians and other members of a core parade group.

One flag, for Simbi, the spirit of things that flow, shows a series of waterfalls leading from mountains into a fish-filled sea where a sailboat labeled "Haiti" floats. Another, for Ougu, the warrior, shows red, orange and magenta flames around two hands that hold a crossed machete and rifle.

"This is amazing," Margot Wittig, of Starnberg, Germany, said as she leaned in for a closer look at a flag representing brothers Sobo—thunder and lightning—and Bade, the wind.

Aziz said some artists and critics accuse Girouard of cultural appropriation because she is white. But he disputes that.

"When you're looking at cultural appropriation you have to look at intent," he said. "I don't see this in this woman; I don't see this in this story. This is somebody who lived in Haiti and immersed herself in the culture."

The sequin covering makes the flags so heavy they have to be hung from metal bars.

Girouard's flags are more than double the size of those used to invoke lwa during ceremonies, and much more heavily sequined. In "Sequin Artists of Haiti," published in 1994, Girouard wrote that ceremonial flags are smaller and less thickly sequined than those that Haitian artists and studios make for sale as art.

"A solid sequined background causes the flag to stiffen, unable to drape from the staff or wave with the dancer during rituals," she wrote.

The exhibit was created by curator Katie Pfohl, who said she had known of Girouard's work from graduate school but hadn't fully realized her Louisiana origins and connections.

Pfohl said she had been in touch with Girouard on and off since moving to Baton Rouge and then New Orleans, but didn't know what shape her flags were in. Then a niece moved down to help take care of Girouard and arranged an exhibit of Girouard's work, including flags, at the Acadiana Center for the Arts in Lafayette, where the DeQuincy-born artist had graduated from college.

Pfohl said the flags' size and number made them great candidates for the two-story Great Hall.

"The exhibit is fabulous. Magnificent," said Sallie Ann Glassman, a friend of Girouard's and a mambo—a priestess of the religion called Vodou. "There is great complexity to very striking images, and an understanding of the Vodoun world-view—that there is an invisible world within the visible world and these worlds interact with each other in ways that can seem magical."