



Vodou Flags

The **A F R I C A N**
S T U D I E S
G A L L E R Y
הגלריה ללימודי אפריקה

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Vodou
Flags

The AFRICAN
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Vodou flag artist Madam Moreau in the workshop with Kuchinate women

Vodou Flags

Vodou is the religion and culture of most Haitians. It emerged in the late 15th century with the Spanish occupation of the island of Hispaniola, which is today divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. It is a religion with no initial period of homogeneous purity, but –rather like the Haitians themselves – it is the result of mixture. Mixture between the faiths of the hundreds of thousands of slaves shipped to the sugar, coffee and cotton plantations, those of the indigenous Tainos, and the Catholicism of the Spanish, and later French, occupiers of the island.

The word 'vodou' originates from the Fon language of the Benins of Western Africa, referring to ritual practices from various sources around Africa, including Congo and Yoruba. Nevertheless, the Vodou religion formed only in the African diaspora, out of the mixture and adaptation to the harsh realities of enslavement, poverty and frequent natural disasters. It is therefore a practical religion deriving out of the needs of the believers' community, providing it with legal, educational, medical and other services.

Vodou is an artistic and aesthetic system that relies on cosmic energy to create harmony between matter and spirit, and in doing so connects the visible and invisible worlds. At the top is the Good Lord (Bondieu), who oversees thousands of deities called Lwa that connect him with the believers. Each is responsible for a different sphere: agriculture, family, love, death, etc. Most of the Lwas originate from African religions, but they have undergone syncretization, combined in turn with several Christian saints. This made it possible for believers to conceal their religious practices from their Catholic masters. It is the Lwas that we see on the flags.

In Vodou religion, the flag is a sacred object identified with the spirit of the deity it represents and plays an important role in the religious ritual. The shimmering reflections from the flags are intended to capture the Lwas's attention and

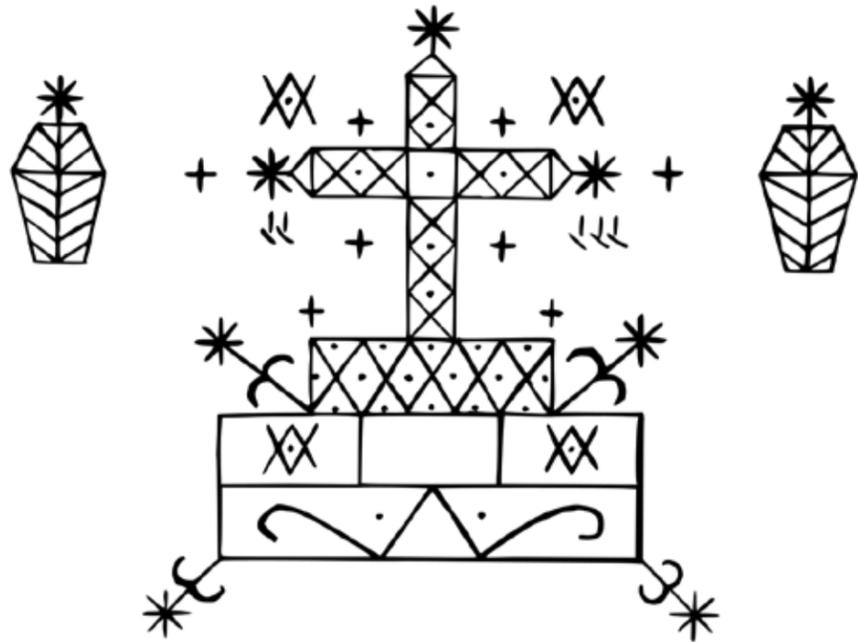
summon them to the ceremony. When not in use, they are placed in an altar to be recharged with spiritual energies.

In the 1980s, the Western art world began taking an interest in the Vodou flags, and since then multiple flags have been created since, particularly for the art market. The collection presented in the exhibition has been generously loaned by Dr Jacques Bartoli of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Dr Bartoli has been supporting Vodou flag artists since the 1980s. It is to him and to Sharona Natan, owner of El-Saieh Gallery in Port-au-Prince, that we owe special gratitude.

In addition, the exhibition presents two social projects carried out in collaboration with Kuchinate (single-needle knitting in Tigrinya) – a collective of African asylum seekers living in Tel Aviv. Founded by Dr Diddy Mymin Kahn and nun Aziza Kidane, Kuchinate is a psychosocial project that provides women with the opportunity to earn a living and become liberated from the harsh realities of their lives through artwork anchored in their African culture. The first project includes artwork inspired by Vodou flags created especially for the exhibition by Kuchinate women guided by Vodou flag artist Madam Moreau who was invited by The African Studies Gallery for two weeks, during which she taught Kuchinate women techniques used to create Vodou flags.

The second project is the product of collaboration between the artist Gil Yefman and Kuchinate women and includes baskets crocheted under the inspiration of the makers' personal stories. The five oversized baskets were crocheted by Dolshi Mebrahtu, Zerife Yuhanns, Salamait Hagos, Akbaret Abrha and Gil Yefman. The women figuratively knitted the stories of their horrendous struggle to reach Israel and Yefam depicted himself as a witness to their testimony.

Idit Toldedano



Vévé

Every deity has its *vévé* – an abstract symbol identified with it. Prior to each ritual, the priest or priestess draw the geometrical design on the ground using some kind of powder (ground maize or coffee or flour), in order to show respect for the spirit. This is how they seduce it and ensure its presence in the ceremony. During the ceremony, the participants dance on the model thus drawn on the floor to the sound of drums, and erase it.



Joseph Old of Pierre
Guede (St Gerard)
Cloth, beads and sequins
930 × 900mm

Guede (St Gerard)

Guede is a member of the family of Lwa that embody the powers of death and fertility. He is the intermediary between this world and the next. He is also known as the mischievous trickster who loves to come to a ceremony and stir things up. However, he is also the master of the realm of death and cemeteries. At the same time, he is also the healer and protector of children. His colours are purple, black and white.

The flag is full of symbols including *vévés*, a cross, a coffin, a skeleton head, the flaming cauldron (*brule zin*), which symbolizes an activation of power, and an image of the bull (Bossou), who is the earth and has a strong aggressive hold on the land; he is also the Lwa who removes the spirits of the dead who have attached themselves to someone.



Eveland Lalann
Saint Gerard
Cloth, beads and sequins
850 × 600mm

Legba

St Lazarus, St Peter or St Anthony (probably)

Legba is the crossroads. He is the spirit who holds the key to the door between the spirit and earthly worlds. He is the first to be called in a ceremony and he comes as an old man, limping. His colours are red and white and his symbols are keys and crosses.



Antoine Oleyant
Probably Legba (St Lazarus, St Peter or St Anthony)
Cloth, beads and sequins
91 × 117mm



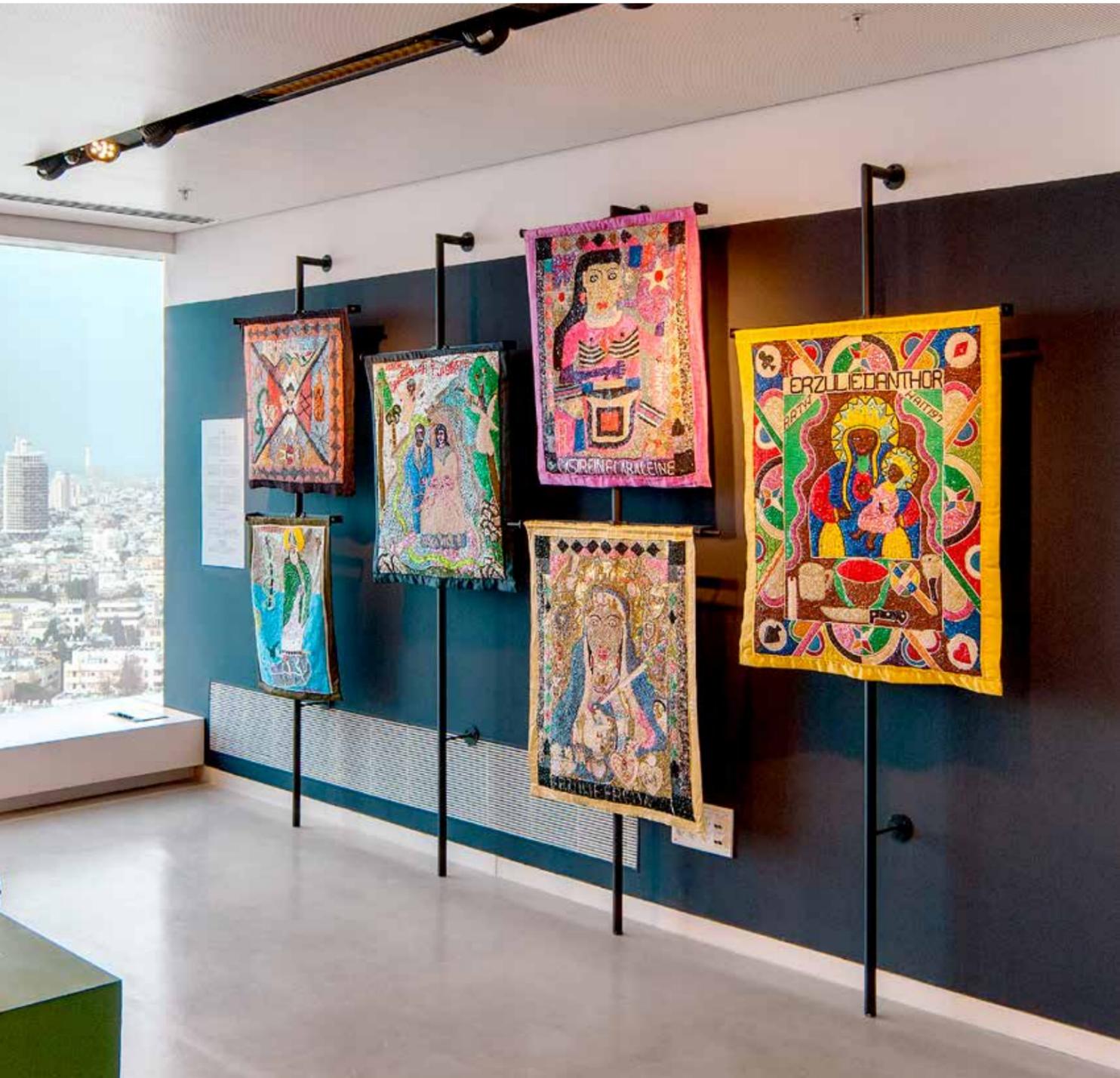
Ronald Gouin
Azaka
 Cloth, beads and sequins
 800 × 800mm

Zaka or Azaka

Is the patron lwa of farmers, but he is also known as a work lwa. He is an extremely hard worker and enjoys the simple things in life. He is extremely popular in all of Haiti. Kouzen Zaka is a master at treating illnesses using leaves and herbs, and is known to keep his most important herbs in his straw sack. He wears denim cloths, a broad brimmed straw hat, and carries a sickle or machete.



Georges Valris
Untitled
 Cloth, beads and sequins
 925 × 1045mm



Ezili

The spirit Ezili has four manifestations, Ezili Freda, Ezili Dantor, Ezili Red-Eyes and La Sirène. The imagery of the spirit Ezili has ultimately evolved into a tradition that is unique in its representation of Haitian culture, specifically the struggles faced by women in the country. Moreover, while Ezili depictions indicate elements of interaction and influence from Catholic visual tradition, her attributes are similar to Yoruba's river deity of Oshun. These combinations are indicative of the selective nature of the local syncretism and the uniqueness of this visual culture to Haiti.

La Sirène

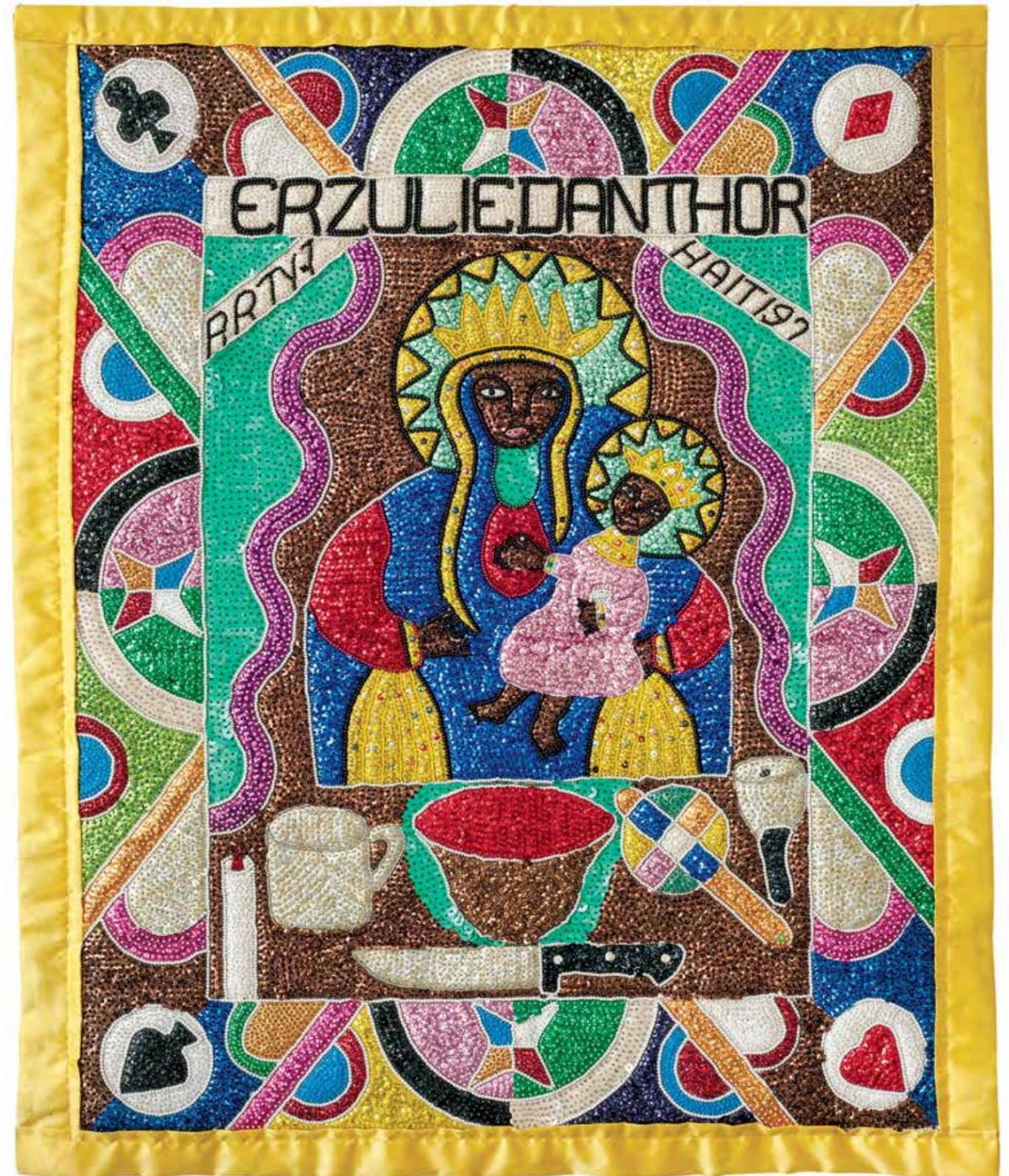
La Sirène is a fourth manifestation of the spirit Ezili. She is the mother of the ocean, strong and powerful. Her symbols include mermaids, mirrors, combs, whales, and snakes. She can instil her devotees with graceful force, but she can also be an overwhelming force of nature.



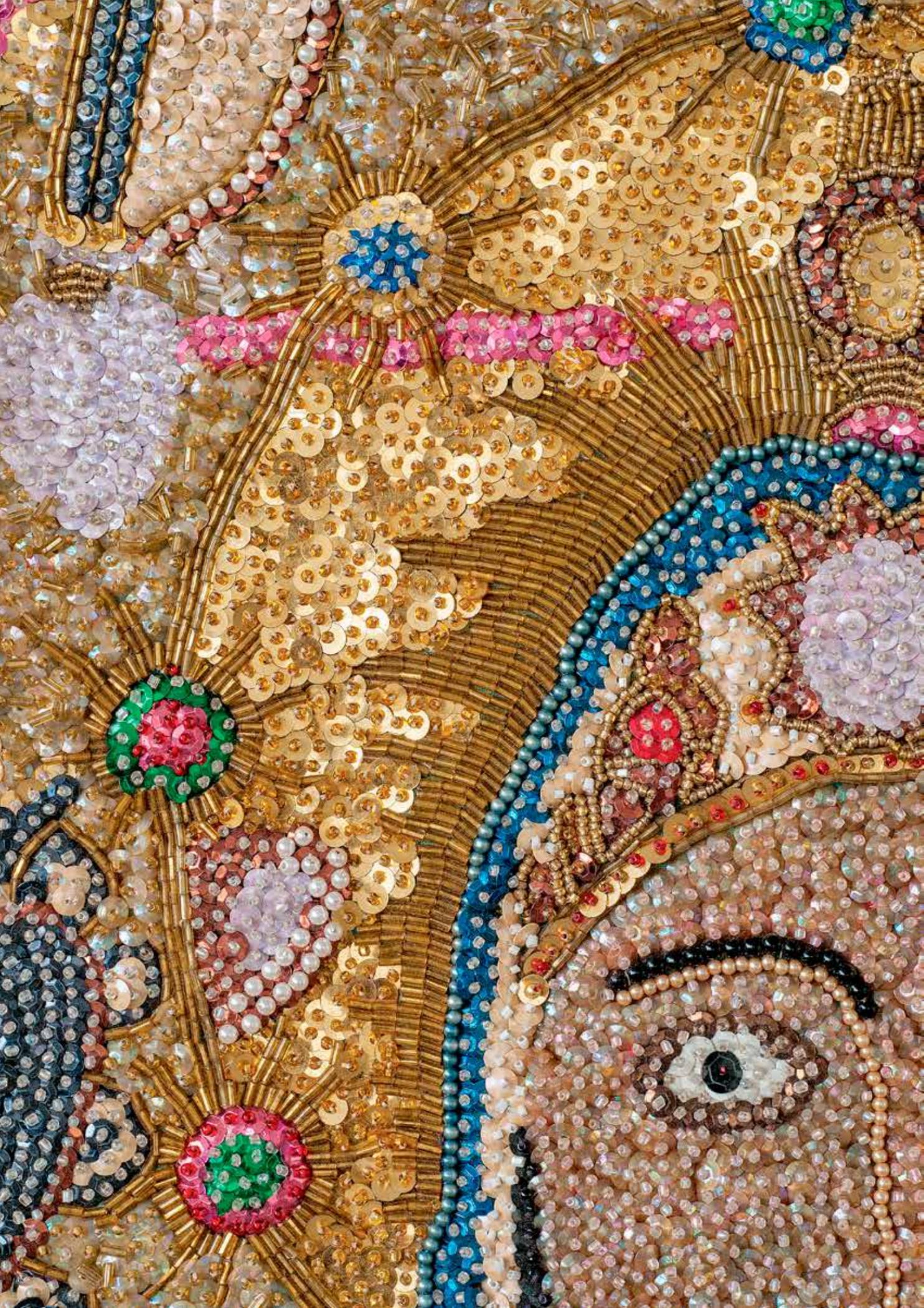
Eveland Lalanne
La Sirène
Cloth, beads and sequins
860 x 690mm

Ezili Dantor

Ezili Dantor is the most popular female Lwa. She is the perfect mother; she will defend her children and family until the very end and therefore is considered as a protector of all children. Her blue garment stands for the all-suffering mother of the Haitian pantheon; the red for the Dahomean and Yoruban deity of war and metallurgy, Ogou. Ezili Dantor's vévé features the dagger that she is believed to have used when she led the people to victory against the French and independence in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804).



Yves Thelemaque
Ezili Dantor
Cloth, beads and sequins
850 × 1010



Eveland Lalanne
Ezili Freda
Cloth, beads and sequins
860 × 690mm

Ezili Freda

Ezili Fred is known as a mistress, although she wears three wedding rings on her finger, showing her marriages to Damballah (the serpent spirit), Ogou (the spirit of war and ironwork), and Agwé (the spirit of fishermen). Freda therefore rules over romantic love, luxury and abundance, gambling luck, and refinement and she is visualized as a most beautiful woman, a white woman with long, flowing blond hair.



Ronald Rockville
The wedding ceremony of Ezili Freda and Dambala
Cloth, beads and sequins
850 × 1010mm



Ronald Guin
Untitled
Cloth, beads and sequins
670 × 640mm

Damballah

Damballah (St Patrick) Dambala is the serpent spirit. As such, he is the spirit of the life force. He is the overseer of wisdom and fertility.



Myrland Constant
Untitled
Cloth, beads and sequins
680 × 1000mm



Dolshi Mebrahtu



Zerife Yuhanns

Crocheted baskets: a collaborative project

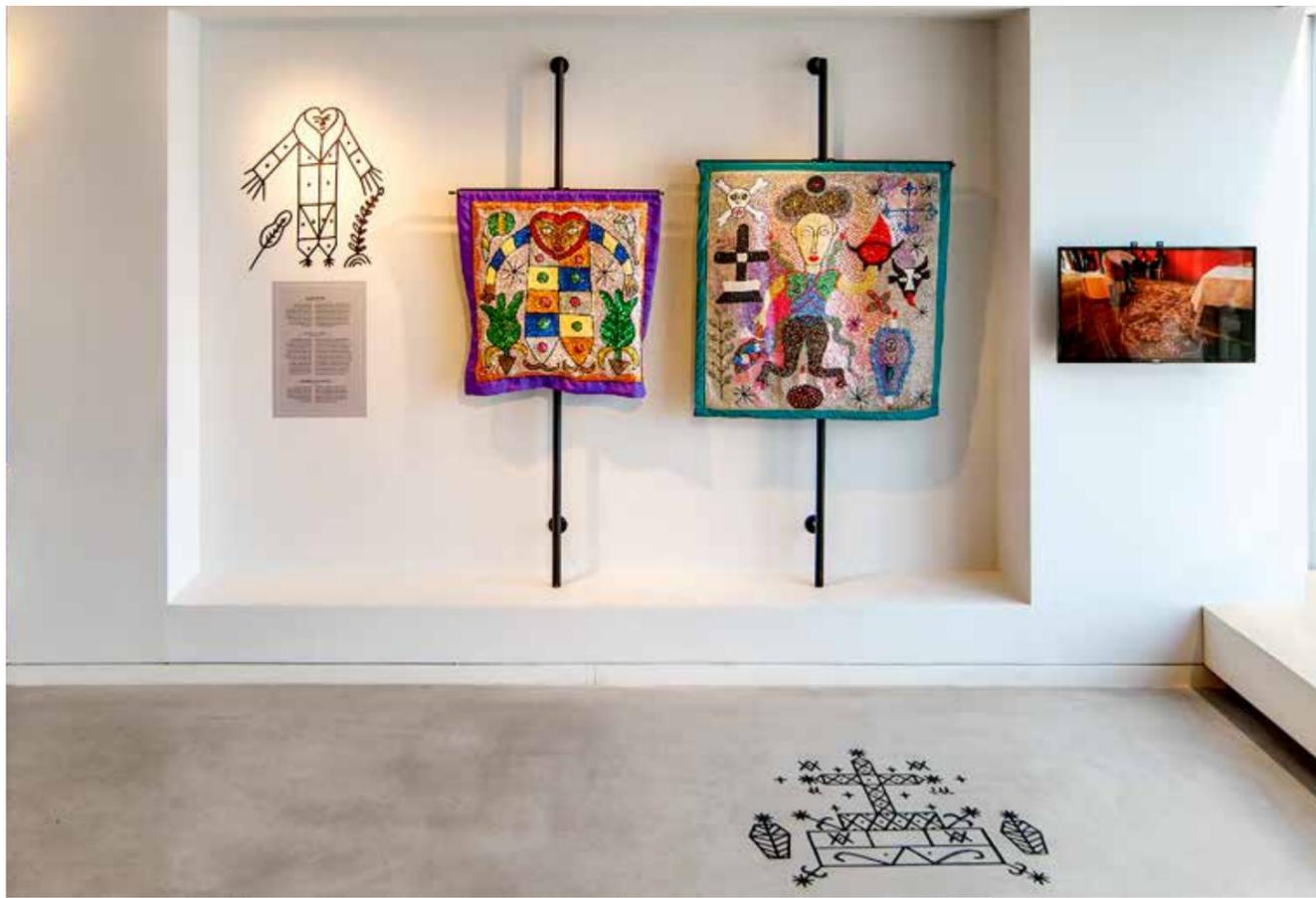
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Salamait Hagos



Akbaret Abrha



№ 12

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