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Vodou: Sacred Powers of Haiti
New Exhibition Explores Important Spiritual and Social Force

CHICAGO – A remarkable exhibition of over 300 authentic Vodou objects from Haiti will open at The Field Museum on Oct. 24, 2014 and run through April 26, 2015.

Vodou: Sacred Powers of Haiti looks beyond myths and manufactured Hollywood images — exhibition visitors will see no dolls with pins stuck into them. Instead, the exhibition explores the underground history and true nature of a living religion, and reveals Vodou as a vital spiritual and social force that remains an important part of daily life in Haiti.

In the exhibition, the story of Vodou is told from the viewpoints of people who practice the religion. Through text and videos, Vodouists express their points of view about various aspects of their symbols, rituals, and spiritual beliefs. This authenticity is reflected in the spelling Vodou (pronounced vah-DOO) — now used by the religion’s practitioners, scholars, and the United State Library of Congress — rather than Voodoo.

Vodou is both a religion and a profound expression of the Haitian national experience. The rituals of Vodou remember the country’s triumph over slavery and honor the spirit of resistance that has sustained Haiti through centuries of hardship.

“The exhibition demonstrates the power of human creativity. It goes beyond the usual stereotypes to bring us into a wonderful and deep world of spiritual beliefs and ritual practices created and maintained by Haitians during times of hardship and suffering brought on by enslavement and its consequences. We hear directly about what Vodou means from the practitioners, in their own voice,” explains Alaka Wali, The Field Museum’s Curator of North American Anthropology and Applied Cultural Research Director.

This exhibition was co-organized by the Canadian Museum of History and the Foundation for the Preservation, Enhancement and Production of Haitian Cultural Works, in partnership with the Ethnography Museum of Geneva Switzerland and the Tropenmuseum of the Netherlands.

At the heart of Vodou are more than 300 objects, including altars, vivid mixed-media sculptures, drums, sequined-covered flags, and charismatic, large-scale
representations of spirits called *lwa* (pronounced luh-WAH). Almost all the objects are placed in the open – not behind glass – allowing visitors to make an unforgettable visual and emotional connection with them. Most objects in *Vodou: Sacred Powers of Haiti* are from the renowned Marianne Lehmann Collection based in Pétionville, Haiti.

The exhibition invites visitors to travel through four thematic areas: an overview of Vodou, an exploration of its historical development, an introduction to the rituals and powers associated with Vodou spirits, and finally an examination of how to place Vodou in the wider context of human spirituality.

From these thematic explorations emerge some key insights into the nature of Vodou. The recounting of Haiti’s harsh past, for example, reveals the extent to which the country’s long history of slavery, oppression and resistance has shaped Vodou symbols and practices. At first a Spanish colony and then a possession of France, Haiti at the end of the 18th century produced half the world’s coffee exports and as much sugar as Jamaica, Cuba and Brazil combined – a bounty that was brought to market by a system of slavery. The experience of slavery is a central reality preserved in Vodou rituals and beliefs.

By introducing visitors to dozens of the *lwa*, or spirits, manifested in Vodou ceremonies – all of them with distinctive personalities reflecting everything from love and sensuality to the bravery of soldiers – the exhibition also illuminates the multiple layers of meaning found in Vodou. On one level, the centrality of spirits in Vodou practice underscores the philosophical idea that life is interconnected, with no divisions between the material and the spiritual, the living and the dead. On another level, invoking spirits gives Vodouists a practical way to pay tribute to ancestors, and keep memories of the past alive.

*Vodou: Sacred Powers of Haiti* provides a rare chance to peek inside the workroom of a *Bizango*—a type of Vodou secret society. Visitors can hear Vodou practitioners share experiences and stories; then, after experiencing the exhibition, visitors can reflect on their own viewpoints in a gallery filled with mirrors. The exhibition demonstrates that Vodou remains a vital force in the contemporary world.

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Tickets to *Vodou: Sacred Powers of Haiti* are included in both Discovery and All Access passes to the Museum. Special discounts available for Chicago residents. Visit fieldmuseum.org for prices and to purchase tickets. Special rates available for tour operators and groups of 10 or more. Call our Group Sales office toll-free at 888.FIELD.85 (888.343.5385).