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If you go to the Davenport Museum of Art's current exhibition of Haitian art from its permanent collection – and you should – be sure to read the notes posted by the works. They offer background on the culture of Haiti that adds to the enjoyment of the show, which features more than 70 works from the museum's collection. And the works themselves illuminate the culture of Haiti.

I didn't expect to enjoy the show, but I did. The exhibition showcases an impressive collection of works, and it's no wonder the museum is working to construct a new building so it can put the art on permanent display.

The story behind the museum's treasure trove is interesting, traced by the exhibit's introductory remarks: "In the early 1960s, a Quad City native, Dr. Walter Neiswanger, made his first trip to Haiti on a tour of the Caribbean. Immediately he was attracted to the formal and iconographic complexities of Haitian art that led him to several purchases. This marked the beginning of a remarkable history of collecting and patronage to the Davenport Museum of Art [DMA], resulting in the formation of the most comprehensive (and first) public collection of Haitian art in the U.S. Since the 1960s, 16 other patrons have joined Dr. Neiswanger in generous gifts to the Haitian collection."

The exhibit begins with the two "founding fathers" of Haitian painters and sculptors: Hector Hyppolite and Georges Liautaud. The museum's remarks identify three major themes for Haitian art, and the rest of the exhibit is organized around them: "genre and history," "vodou and the sacred," and "fantasy and the imagination."

The commentary also notes that the diversity of sources for Haitian art – African, French, Spanish, and the native Arawak cultures, as well as Haiti's history and spirituality – has created a singular tradition in the Caribbean country: "a unique and startling blend of folklore, strong emotions, profound beliefs, and love of storytelling."

The style of most of the works is primitive, similar to (yet very different in content and emotion from) Grandma Moses. One example is a piece that features the DMA's benefactor: *Le Docteur*

Neiswanger dans les Jardines de la Villa Boedicia
(
Dr. Neiswanger in the Gardens at the Villa Boedicia
). The artist, Edouard Duval-Carrié, portrays Neiswanger at the tropical home of Bette and Lawrence Peabody, longtime residents of Port-au-Prince. Villa Boedicia is a Victorian gingerbread manor house that once graced a 12,000-acre estate. The colors of this painting are more muted and subtle than the primary colors of many artists of the primitive school, but the geometric and busy composition with little illusion of depth is consistent with that genre. The artist shows gratitude toward the doctor-patron of the arts by having the fish in the pond bobbing their heads up in greeting, and lest the viewer miss this detail, he has Neiswanger pointing to the fish.

The sculpture of Haitian deity Ayida Wèdo is a very sensitive work in mahogany by Nacius Joseph. To quote again from the DMA's exhibition notes: "Before being Haiti's first major carver in wood, Nacius Joseph was a shipwright in the town of Petit Goâve. He uses the grain of the wood and contrasts polished surfaces with rougher textures, creating complex and elegant figures based upon both Roman Catholic- and vodou-inspired subjects. This goddess figure is the consort of Danbala, the supreme serpent divinity who is associated with rain, wisdom, and fecundity. Ayida Wèdo is also called the rainbow spirit."

The sensitive modeling of the goddess' features is enhanced by the artist's choice of a matte finish to the wood. Some areas are well-finished, and others show the chisel marks, which adds to the overall piece.

I was also impressed by the steel relief sculptures, crafted from steel oil barrels, the same source material for the steel drums of the Caribbean. The method of forming is similar in that the metal is hammered into a flattened shape, but different in that the metal is then cut into intricate patterns.

Ogou, by Murat Brièrre, is one example of this detailed style. The working of the iron articulates the muscles of the abdomen, and the cutting of the iron forms the lattice-work of the wings. The background materials from the DMA fill in some context. "Ogou names a family of warrior or military spirits reshaped or derived from a West African deity. The senior member of this brotherhood of military spirits is Sen Jak/St. Jacques/St. James/Santiago, who is usually depicted astride a horse wielding a sword. Traditionally, Ogou fights for justice, but his temper gets him into trouble, and he must often be calmed. This *lwa* (spirit) has dominion over all things iron, including vehicles on the road. He is associated with healing and fertility and is one of the husbands of Ezili. Brièrre's depiction of this warrior spirit includes the metamorphosis into or from a winged and clawed creature. The clawed feet may refer to the traditional sacrifice of a chicken in certain vodou ceremonies."

We've quoted extensively from the exhibition notes to show how an understanding of the rich Haitian culture (and its many forebears) can enhance appreciation and enjoyment of the artworks.

On the flip side, the show also demonstrates how one can better understand a culture through

its art. This show will reward the viewer with an improved sense of the social climate of Haiti, in addition to providing a glimpse of some very entertaining works of art.

The exhibition of Haitian art runs through April 1 at the Davenport Museum of Art.