

The truth about voodoo

FOR those of you who have wished evil thoughts on your boss, ex-husband or next-door neighbor — perhaps even resorted to poking needles into a doll in a desperate attempt to resolve unsettled issues, only to wake up

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By **ALLYSON
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the next day to find everything at status quo — there is an explanation.

There is no such thing as a voodoo doll in the Vodou religion.

The spirits you're trying to appeal to have no idea just what it is you're doing.

Somewhere along the way, Hollywood decided that the needles and dolls would sell tickets. It made no difference if it was steeped in the ancient Afro-Caribbean religion or not. It was a powerful image.

The American Museum of Natural History hopes to clarify that and other misconceptions of Vodou in its new exhibition, "The Sacred Art of Haitian Vodou."

While dolls are part of the exhibition — they are considered "messengers" for spirits that help people probe the mysteries of life, death and sex — there is no mention of their so-called "magical powers" anywhere in the show. That's because "they've often been used to mock blacks and their cul-



Visitors to the American Museum of Natural History's current Haitian Vodou exhibition look at "Ressemblant," a painting by Fritz St. Jean. "Sacred Art" and artifacts will be on display through Jan. 3.

New York Post: Jennifer Weisbord

ture," said exhibit co-creator Donald Cosentino, professor of African and Caribbean folklore at the University of California at Los Angeles, which organized the exhibition.

"Haiti had been demonized and its culture ridiculed in the United States because it represented a slave rebellion to a slave-owning society — the worst fear realized," Cosentino said.

The exhibition hopes to change that perception. It portrays a culture not obsessed with freaky witchcraft and dark rituals — as it is conventionally depicted — but a culture

steeped in several traditions and practices.

Vodou (Haitian Creole for "sacred"), the predominant religion of the Haitian people, began when enslaved Africans were brought to the Americas in the 16th century and melded their religious traditions with Western practices — especially Roman Catholicism. The slaves worshipped the Catholic saints of their Spanish masters while secretly seeing them as representations of African deities.

Vodou, then, represents the fusion of several different belief systems into an original religion.

"I'm a strict Irish Roman Catholic. I'm delighted to see some of our artwork incorporated here," said visitor Peter Shields, 80, of Linden, N.J., as he walked through the exhibition. "I'm also an artist — I'm doing Monets right now — but I'm really intrigued by their work. I'll probably go buy the book after I leave."

The exhibition is divided into eight sections. It starts out by introducing Haiti and its political history through the use of paintings, photographs and videos by some of Haiti's most renowned artists. It then goes on to explore the various aspects of altar art, fo-

cusing on objects used to approach the principal divinities. There are drums and rattles used as objects to summon the spirits, wrapped containers filled with herbs and leaves, bottles, bowls and ceramic pots used to contain the spirits.

The next section is devoted to the most celebrated form of Vodou art — a spectacular collection of sequined flags that are used to salute the divinities in ceremonies. Each one is a masterpiece in its own right — one brighter, more intricate and colorful than the next.

At the end of the exhibi-

tion stands a full replica of a Vodou temple. It is the focal point of the exhibition, a place where visitors can sit on wooden chairs and stools and watch large-screen videos of Vodou ceremonies or discuss the ancient religion with a Haitian ritual expert.

Next to the recreated temple are three altars containing scores of sacred objects intended to summon the spirits. Each one honors one of the three basic forms of Vodou — the benign spirits, the aggressive, fiery spirits and the secret society, whose imagery is meant to intimidate in order to impart respect.

"I've always been a little fearful of the religion," said Jo Kearns, from Raleigh, N.C. "I've always associated it with something evil. I never realized how beautiful their artwork was. Now I can learn about it without being afraid," she said.

"I love this religion," said Matthew Vose, 36, of Mansfield, Conn., as he stood chatting with one of the Vodou experts in front of an altar. "I have a setup of my own religious artifacts at home — just little cards. Nothing fancy. It's all about showing respect for a higher power," he said, tossing a dollar bill into the scattered pile of bills already thrown in as an offering to the spirits.

"It's the least I can do."

"The Sacred Art of Haitian Vodou," American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79th Street; (212) 769-8100; on display through Jan. 3, 1999.