

# Spirits' Energy Imbues Artist's Brush

## His work frames a vodou exhibit

By Marc Ferris

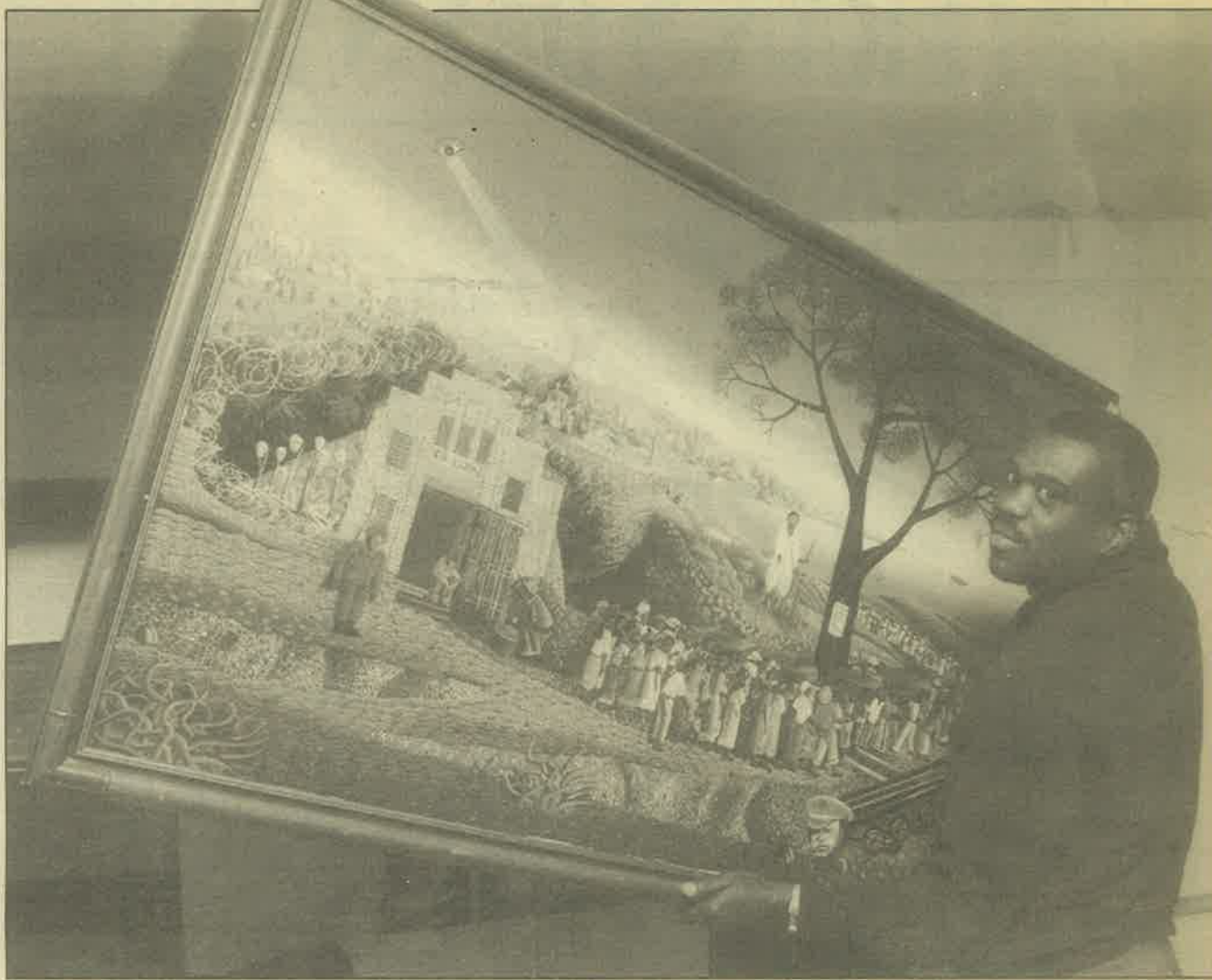
Artistically speaking, Queens Village-based painter Fritz St. Jean has the first and the last words in an extraordinary exhibition entitled "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou," on view at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan through Jan. 3.

When museum officials decided to commission original artwork to accompany this traveling exhibit, curated by the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA, they turned to Leon Chalom, a Manhattan art dealer and collector who specializes in Haitian painters. "I immediately thought of Fritz," Chalom said. "He's exactly the type of artist they were looking for."

St. Jean, born in Haiti in 1954, painted three large canvases for the exhibit, two of which frame the gallery's entryway. The other work is the final object in the 500-piece display. In addition, "Ressemblant," a smaller 1990 painting rich with political and religious allusions, is the last item visitors see before entering a room designed to resemble a Port-au-Prince vodou temple.

Tall and soft-spoken, St. Jean came to the United States in 1985. "In the provinces where I grew up, in the town of Leogane, my family is with vodou," he said during an interview at the museum. "They did everything, medical treatments, education; it's like a way of life."

Though he's not a devout practitioner today, the religion still informs his style, and he has attended vodou ceremonies in Queens, where the census counted 23,643 Haitians in 1990.



Newsday Photo / J. Conrad Williams Jr.

Haitian artist Fritz St. Jean, whose work begins and ends the "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" exhibit in Manhattan, holds one of his paintings.

"I need to talk about political problems and social problems, and vodou helps me do this," he said. "I began to paint in 1971 and used to do decorative jungle scenes for tourists, but after 1980, I started to explain myself more. The best way to explain myself is vodou because this is my culture."

Vodou is a Creole word that derives from the West African Fon civilization's term *vodun*, which means sacred energy. Known in English as voodoo, of course, Haitian religious practices have suffered from unfavorable stereotypes. Hollywood movies, for example, helped distort its tenets by dispensing images of zombies and pin-cushion dolls capable of harming enemies.

"Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" is concerned with how the religion melded elements of African practices, Catholicism and occult imagery into a unique belief system. The show eschews black magic and exoticism to focus on vodou's representation in vernacular and fine arts.

"It's a tremendous thing, this exhibit," St. Jean said. "It's a wealth for me and for the community, also, because a lot of the people represent vodou like

it's a negative thing, but that's not true. Vodou is positive because there's a lot of power for everyone, even if they're not Haitian."

Tapping this energy for his work, St. Jean blends formal training, received at Haiti's Centre D'Art, with otherworldly inspiration. The three canvases he completed for the exhibit course with mystical imagery and an historical consciousness.

"When the museum contacted me to do this, there's a traffic of spirits that come to me," he said. "The spirits give me some communication every night when I go to sleep. Sometimes they wake me up to go to work and they explain to me what I have to do, to paint."

Two of the paintings, "Legba" and "Azili Danto," depict personified vodou deities. Master of the crossroads, Legba stands sentry over a lush island. Tree branches sprout from his arms, while his legs turn into gnarled roots that spring from the earth.

In "Azili Danto," the maternal spirit accepts an offering of sacrificial items. "Azili come every night to explain to me what I have to put in the painting," he said. "I don't know what Azili eats,

but she comes and tells me."

Apparently, she craved a bowl of worms, a large portion of okra and a turtle, which is prized for its medicinal qualities.

The other commissioned work, "Sen Jak," shows Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Haiti's liberator, appearing before a throng of newly freed comrades. As his red charger rears, he stares impassively at the viewer as if he's wearing an African mask.

These are St. Jean's first large works, but he took just two months to complete the trio. "When I do those paintings I have good communication with the spirits," he said. "Maybe they helped me because I make those paintings so fast. I was working all day, all night; I go to sleep and after two hours they wake me up to work. I was getting sick because I paint too much."

In homage to his homeland, St. Jean will continue answering his muses: "Everything I paint comes from inside of me. There's no superficiality. I feel like I'm an ambassador for Haiti when I paint."

Marc Ferris is a freelance writer.

### BOROUGHWIDE / Elder-Law Seminar

The Queens Borough Public Library will host three free seminars on elder-law issues during the next two weeks.

The first seminar on these issues will be held at 2 p.m. tomorrow at 92-24 Rockaway Blvd., Ozone Park.

On Nov. 12, a second seminar will take place at 95-25 Rockaway Beach Blvd. in Seaside, starting at 7 p.m.

The third session will take place at 2 p.m. Nov. 17, at 151-10 14th Rd. in Whitestone.

### JACKSON HEIGHTS / Home Mortgage Lecture

A comprehensive mortgage seminar sponsored by Independence Community Bank will be held on Monday at 7 p.m. at the branch at 89-01 Northern Blvd.

Prospective buyers can learn what mortgage programs they qualify for, what they should look for in selecting a home, some of the hidden costs and what kind of house they can afford while maintaining their lifestyle.

Bank representatives will answer questions. The seminar is free and open to the public.

### JACKSON HEIGHTS / Free Computer Seminar

A free seminar on computer orientation and job opportunities in high-tech industries will be presented at the Asian and Pacific Islanders HIV-AIDS Center, 74-09 37th Ave., 4th floor, tomorrow at 4:15 p.m. The program is being offered by the Humanist Center of Cultures in Manhattan. Experts will answer questions on trends and opportunities the industry offers. The Humanist Center of Culture is a nonprofit organization that seeks to build bridges between cultures and defend the rights of immigrants. Call to register, 718-670-7021.