With the help of a number of slides an attempt will be made to address the title questions. Where possible, material in the exhibition Sacred Art of Haiti and its catalogue will be referred to. Black & white photographs are mostly by my late husband Paul-Henri Bourguignon, himself an artist, critic and art historian.

The exhibition raises a large number of questions beyond those indicated in my title. Let me just mention a few of these: An exhibition of "Sacred Arts of Haiti" is itself a "sign of the times" and an example of "blurred" rather than "mixed" genres. It involves questions such as: What is "art", what is "sacred", what is commerce? The exhibit also may be seen as well as an example of globalization and commercialization; it involves blended tastes, curiosities, popular meanings, populations, identities—migrations and perhaps loss(?) of boundaries. Are the roots of Haitian art to be found in religion? When/if it is art, is it no longer religion but to be thought of in terms of aesthetics and the function of the objects in the market place? What is the role of art (or the arts) in the economy of Haiti? Of the Haitian diaspora?

To whom does the art address itself? How is it understood by its creators? By its clients?

The very interesting catalogue, with its valuable commentaries, seems to omit from significant discussion a major feature of Haitian society: its class structure and the place of the artist, the art trade and the art buyer in that structure. And what is the relationship between religion/art/commerce and politics?

Slides:

1. Vèvè: (comments with apologies to Karen McC.Brown) drawings on paper of several vèvè. They are "classical"—i.e., easily recognizable and apparently unchanged over time; in this sense, they represent a limitation on the frequent, generally accurate, remarks on the lack of standardization or uniformity in vodou. In this paper notebook version, they are labelled and in colored pencil. The fact that (some) oungan have such notebooks raises issues with regard to (some sort of) literacy in a population that was, at that time, 90% illiterate.

Vèvè are tools of ritual and represent traditional, esoteric knowledge. So why are they reproduced in books on Haitian art (e.g., Rodman)? Perhaps because a. they require skill, b. show an aesthetics of form, which impress outsiders, (inclusion of aesthetic features, e.g., shapes found in elegant French scripts, wrought iron work, etc.). Are they seen as "art" by those who make and use them?
Note on Aizan-azang-MJH/Dahomey/Haiti.

Veve have been "translocated" into other media, e.g., into sequin flags, a relatively recent development. This is part of their "commercial" commodity aspect. That is, in this medium they become permanent, transportable, and tradable, i.e., they can be taken out of their ritual context.

Note that as ritual tools, while they require skill and effort, veve are transient—will be destroyed whether by pecking chickens or dancers' feet. In Western tradition, art objects are meant to be made for sale (or gift) and to be "respected"—treated well, appreciated, preserved, and, at least traditionally, not to be transient—even performance art or "happenings" are preserved in stills and video or film.

There are, of course, ground drawings, "art" of a transient type, in other religious traditions: in West Africa, where veve come from or among the Navajo and the same question of use vs permanence arises with reference to both ritual and utilitarian objects more generally.

Comment: shrines/altars are represented in the show/catalogue; it seems clear that these involve assemblages of ritual objects/objects to be used (and even used up) in ritual and thus are "utilitarian" and do not invite aesthetic contemplation. Do we invite such contemplation by placing them in museums? Haitian ritual materials have been "syncretic" assemblages from earliest times, it seems, and as world trade globalizes, they are ever more so. (In this connection, it is interesting to consider the presence of West African traders in NYC—cf. Stoller, 1997)

2. The manbo Lorgina: charisma and theatricality

3. Ti Roro's drum. Drumming, like veve, has moved from the ritual to the secular, commercial context. But so has ritual as performance.

Comment: By "looking" at "sacred arts," we omit the live context, which is full of movement (dance and other performative aspects), music and other sounds, verbal arts, foods, smells, etc., as well as the effectiveness of ritual—curative, interpersonal, psychological, spiritual, and so forth. Where religion is "embodied" in ritual, it is "disembodied" in the museum (and does it thereby become art?). And in talking about these matters, we intellectualize rather than experience and participate. Note also that there has been recent interest in "cabinets of curiosities" which were the Renaissance beginnings of museums in private, princely collections—are we seeing something similar, though updated, here?

4. Hyppolite: photo, death mask by Jason Seeley. Do lwa do the painting? (Léogane)

Comment: Haitian paintings from religion to commerce. The market for Haitian paintings--now traded at auctions; note the effect of commercial interest on creativity--the stimulation of a "dormant potential." Note conflict at the beginning (1947-8) between "evolusés" and "primitives" -- the triumphal arc for Estimé.

5. Tombs and crosses--Furcy (Rodman), etc.

