

# | MUPANAH and the Promotion of Historical and Cultural Values

by Robert Paret

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Inscribed in gold letters over the Musée du Panthéon National Haïtien (MUPANAH) are the following words:

Herein are kept the sacred remains and all the memorials and testimonies of the Founding Fathers of the Nation of Haiti; and the chiefs who, in our history, brought about agreement and progress to serve the Nation; and the men and women who increased its renown by their example of courage, knowledge, talent or citizenship. The Pantheon-National Museum has been designed and built to honour their memory.

## A brief history

An important moment in the history of humanity is taught in this national sanctuary. It begins when the first settlers, the Tainos, arrived in the island of Ayiti around AD 300. It provides information about the period when Spanish colonists, led by Christopher Columbus, 'discovered' the Americas in 1492, seeking gold

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and spices. The intrusion of these European conquistadors eradicated the indigenous peoples in less than twenty-five years. The genocide destabilized the country, creating the upheaval that was at the root of the events that followed. The island, coveted by all the European powers, was the scene of incessant struggles to loot its wealth. This was what interested the French adventurers, pirates and buccaneers who initially settled the nearby islet of La Tortue (Turtle Island) and later, from 1635, settled permanently on the large island of Hispaniola. They organized themselves as a colony and in a short time founded large plantations, which depended on the slave trade for development, bringing black slaves from Africa from around 1510. The deportees were ruthlessly exploited, and many died a cruel death. The sweat of their brows sowed the seeds of the island's wealth. The slave uprising in 1791 led to the great anti-slavery revolution in 1804 and gave birth to the world's first black republic: Haiti.

### The museum and its mission

The act creating Haiti's Musée du Panthéon National states that it is a national entity, set up 'to perpetuate and disseminate the memory of the Fathers of the Nation, and, complying with the aims selected by the government authorities, formulate the general policy for creating and running history, art and culture museums throughout the regions and local communities in Haiti, and participate in heritage conservation and in disseminating national culture'. Its aim is to

collect and conserve the vestiges of the Fathers of the Nation; list, collect, accept, classify, restore, acquire and conserve

articles of artistic, historical, archaeological or other value that are or will become part of our national heritage; motivate and direct young Haitians in their quest for identity through studies, guided visits and all other cultural events that are within the remit and skills of MUPANAH; offer international visitors the possibility of getting to know Haiti through its art and history; deepen relationships and facilitate discussion with overseas museums and the appropriate international bodies; create museums or encourage their creation wherever the need is felt throughout the Republic; and take all necessary legal initiatives to ensure that the historical collection of national heritage is enriched.

(author's translation)

### Legal and structural framework

MUPANAH is an autonomous subsidiary of the Ministry of Culture and Communications. The ministry has thirteen such subsidiaries, and four of them in particular are responsible for the conservation and promotion of the historical and cultural heritage of the nation of Haiti: the Institut de Sauvegarde du Patrimoine National (ISPAN, the Institute for the Conservation of National Heritage), the National Archives, the National Library and MUPANAH.

Situated on the largest public square in the capital, the Champs de Mars (or Heroes of

Independence Square), the elegant silhouette of the MUPANAH building, next to the National Palace, is one of the most modern in Haiti. It was designed and built between 1973 and 1974 by a French architect called Alexandre Guichard, assisted by the Haitian architect Albert Mangonès. Originally destined for a very different, and highly controversial, purpose,<sup>1</sup> the building became the home of MUPANAH and was inaugurated on 14 April 1983, when France repatriated the symbolic remains of Toussaint Louverture from the Fort de Joux in the French Jura. Since then, it has fulfilled its vital remit of educating young Haitians and helping give expression to the Haitian people's sense of identity.

In practice, this involves specialized museum guides speaking English, Creole, Spanish and French, who lead groups of Haitian and international visitors in educational and informative visits, seven days a week. These visits follow the historical trail from the period of Columbus's arrival to the present day. A second trail leads to the fine, semicircular art gallery that forms the backdrop of the history gallery. This is the permanent home of the museum's art collection, and also presents temporary exhibitions of Haitian and international artists.

The first section portrays the life of native peoples who lived on the island. Visitors are struck by the peaceful existence in Ayiti, as shown by reproductions portraying this period. A few objects and tools in daily use show that the lifestyle of these First Peoples was very simple, but open and friendly. The second section covers the Spanish conquest, which began in 1492 with the arrival of Columbus, the settlements of the first colonists,

their conflicts with the Tainos and their inhuman treatment of them. The beauty of Queen Anacaona stands out against this dark backdrop. History reports her interpersonal skills and her hospitality. The most symbolic and important item that remains from the Spanish adventure into the New World is the anchor of the *Santa Maria*, one of Columbus's caravels, which ran aground on 24 December 1492 off Caracol Bay. Spain would be proud to possess this precious relic, which would merit an important place in the great Museo del Prado in Spain.

The third section recounts the arrival of the first African slaves and their ordeal throughout three centuries of slavery. Some of the museum's exhibits bear witness to this shameful period: the heavy chains that the slaves wore around their neck, wrists and ankles, instruments of torture and work tools, and also documents recording the sales of slaves, the 'ebony' provided by the slave triangle, and engravings that give an impression of colonial houses. The fourth section looks at the revolutionary period, which began after the general uprising of the slaves following the 'Bwa Caiman' or 'Baw Kay Imam' ceremony of the night of 13–14 August 1791, and which ended with the Battle of Vertiere. A large fresco portrays this epic battle, which took place on 18 November 1803 and which led to national independence on 1 January 1804. Personal effects belonging to Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Alexandre Pétion, Henry Christophe and other important figures of the period are also on display here. The Liberty Bell that Toussaint Louverture rang in 1793, when the French Commissioner Sonthonax proclaimed general freedom for slaves, is an important item in this section. Sonthonax was part of the second civil

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commission sent to Saint-Domingue, and MUPANAH is proud to own the only known existing portrait of this historical figure.

The last section covers the Haitian period itself. It emphasizes the Northern Kingdom, with the monumental silhouette of the Henry Citadel and the portrait from 1818 of King Henry by the English painter Richard Evans, said to have been Director of the Fine Arts Academy in the Sans Souci Palace. The portrait is thought to have been painted from the life, which would make it the only known portrait of this king and hero of independence painted during his lifetime. Another area of the same section covers the second empire, with a backdrop of a

fresco portraying the crowning of Faustin I (second Emperor of Ayiti, from 1849 to 1859). The Emperor's crown is the centrepiece. This very beautiful and extremely valuable work of art is made of gold and set with diamonds, garnets, turquoise, lapis lazuli and other precious stones. Two other items are noteworthy. One is the 'Asoto' drum belonging to Alexandre Pétion, another hero of independence. It is sculpted in rare wood and bears very faint traces of a sketch thought to be

by Pétion himself, which seems to be of the national coat of arms that he is thought to have designed. The other item from this period is a bell from the first parish church in Port-au-Prince, built in 1771 on the Randot estate. The church became a cathedral in 1861. It was burned down in 1986, during political riots. Miraculously, the bell was rescued by ISPAN staff and given to MUPANAH, where it was incorporated in the collection. The visit ends with the gallery of Haitian heads of state, from Toussaint Louverture to the current president, René Prével. It gives visitors the opportunity to discover the men and the one woman who shaped the destiny of the nation.

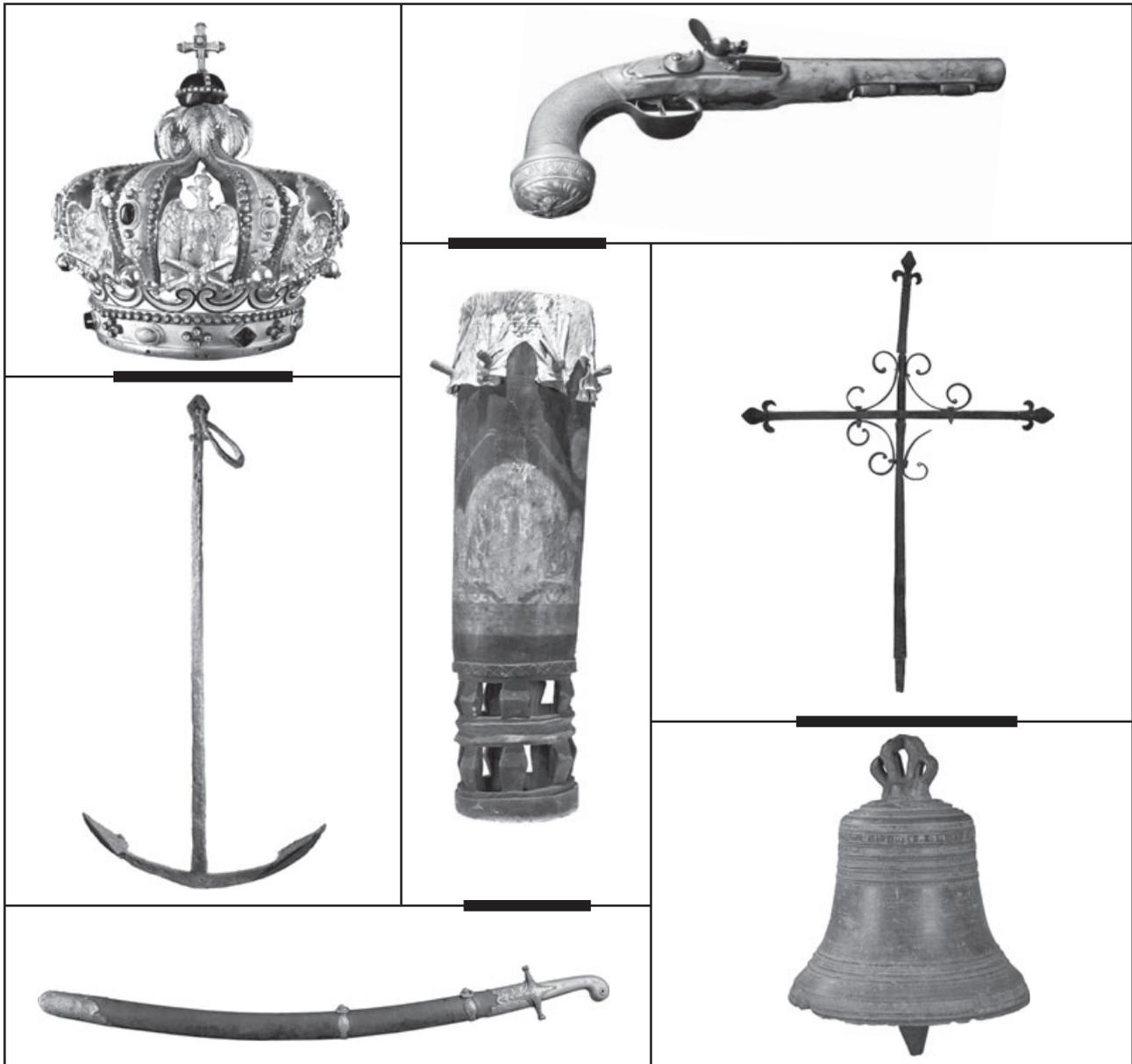
The visit gives a fairly complete view of the permanent collections of objects, documents and works of art in MUPANAH. The museum and its collection form a cultural

heritage of great historical and symbolic importance, making it an unparalleled source for teaching the history of Haiti. It remains Haiti's only national institution with such a variety of testimonies to the cultural, artistic and historical heritage of the nation. Local and expatriate Haitians visit the museum, along with international visitors. However, the vast majority of visitors are young people and school parties, which shows the importance of the museum for educating the young people of Haiti.



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11. Sole portrait representing King Henry Christophe of the Northern Kingdom.



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12. From left to right:

Crown of Faustin 1st, second Emperor of Haiti 1849-1859.

Horse pistol offered to Toussaint Louverture by French Executive Directory.

Anchor of the Santa Maria, one of the caravels of Christopher Columbus who arrived on December 24, 1492 at the Bay of Caracol in the north of Ayiti.

Asòtò drum (from Voodoo religion) that belonged to President Alexandre Petion, the first President of the Republic of Haiti.

Cross from the parish church of Port-au-Prince which later became the first cathedral of Haiti.

Sword offered to Toussaint Louverture by the French Executive Directory.

Liberty Bell rung in 1793 by Toussaint Louverture, when freedom was declared for all slaves.



13. Exterior view of MUPANAH.

### Present context

The earthquake of 12 January 2010 was a catastrophe for the whole country. The damage to every area of national life is still acute and clearly visible. The cultural domain has been particularly affected. Most of the buildings with heritage collections have collapsed. Many works of art classified as part of the national cultural heritage have been lost. The whole of the precious collection in the Episcopalian Holy Trinity

Cathedral is buried under rubble. This includes the most important works of art of the grand masters of naïve Haitian painting, some of which had been there for over sixty years. Efforts to recover and restore certain fragments face impossible odds. The Art Centre of the College Saint Pierre, which also used to house a large collection of Haitian art, was badly damaged. The Port-au-Prince Art Centre, considered to be one of the most important national institutions for the academic education of Haitian artists, also suffered, and its collection has

been put into long-term storage in freight containers. Some private art galleries housing very valuable paintings and sculptures have also suffered heavy losses.

In this post-disaster context MUPANAH has had to assume its role of protecting and conserving the country's artistic, cultural and historic heritage by reacting quickly. Since the building withstood the earthquake,<sup>2</sup> all the museum's services have been alerted and mobilized to try to assist other public institutions and private collectors, especially when they need to house their works of art in a safe place. In February 2010 the General Directorate of MUPANAH officially asked public figures, public entities, charitable institutions and individuals who possess documents, objects or furniture of artistic, archaeological or other interest to entrust them temporarily or permanently to the museum for safekeeping. MUPANAH assured the legal owners of these heritage assets that every possible precaution had been taken to house and conserve them in the best condition, protect them and restore them if necessary. Owners were given an official receipt so that they could recover their property once the situation was safe again.

### Prospects for the future

MUPANAH is in partnership with various appropriate international organizations to carry out this new facet of its mission. One of these is the International Council of Museums (ICOM), and the General Directorate of MUPANAH helped the council draw up its Red List of endangered Haitian heritage. The list was published at MUPANAH on 13 October 2010, at a launch attended by the

Minister of Culture and Communications, ICOM officials, the press, members of civil society and celebrities from the world of the arts and culture. Ten thousand copies of the Haiti Red List have been published in Creole, French and English and distributed throughout the country, particularly by MUPANAH. The list gives an inventory of items of national heritage, housed in various places before the 2010 earthquake, which have not yet been recovered and which therefore run the risk of being looted. Obviously, every Haitian institution involved in protecting cultural property is exercising the utmost vigilance to prevent this.

The challenge for the future, after the earthquake, is to extend the museum's activity throughout the country, improve its services to the public and create and deepen relationships with similar museums overseas. Since MUPANAH's historical *raison d'être* is to serve all humanity, it is important for it to be kept and safeguarded for future generations. With a consolidated organizational structure having clearly defined contacts throughout the country, and the creation of a General Directorate of Museums in Haiti, the unique legacy of the Republic of Haiti would be better preserved and transmitted to future generations.

### | NOTES

1. The building was due to house the remains of the dictator François Duvalier, according to the wishes of his son, former president Jean Claude Duvalier. This created a scandal and had to be abandoned. Later the building was converted into the Museum of the Fathers of the Nation.
2. MUPANAH was re-opened to the public on Monday 18 October 2010.