WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II

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Cover image: FIRELEI BÁEZ for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona, 2018. Oil on canvas. Installation view: 10th Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste (Hanseatenweg), Berlin, 9 June 9-September 2018. Photo: Timo Ohler. Cover design by Anna Gatti

39. Meaning and Roots in Copper

Winifred Mason in New York and Haiti

Terri Geis

Thirteen hand-made, lustrous copper leaves looped into small circles form the chain of a necklace, while a brass and copper cuff-bracelet poetically evokes a drum;

Fig. 1 Winifred Mason, Copper and Brass Cuff, ca. 1945. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

both pieces were inspired by the cyclical forces of nature and spiritual practices in Haiti. The artist of this jewelry, Winifred Mason, circled back and forth between New York and Haiti from the 1940s to the early 1960s, a U.S.-born modernist consistently seeking to reflect in metal the commonly-found but often ephemeral patterns of Vodou—including

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the plant-symbol vèvès of the Lwa Loko, Legba, and Ayizan, and the repeated sounds of the wood-carved peg-drum during ceremonies. As Mason explained in a 1946 profile for *Ebony* magazine:

> I started investigations into the origins of basic patterns used by the Haitian people in arts such as weaving and jewelry. Whenever I found a design I sought to discover its meaning and roots. Everywhere there were primitive designs in the native dress, on the voodoo drums and decorating native musical instruments.[1]

These symbols recurring "everywhere" across the art and material culture of Haiti, as well as the oral patterns in song and story have been noted by the Martinican poet Édouard Glissant as encompassing "an art of repetition", and he reflects that, "such a discourse therefore gains from being repeated at leisure, like the tale recounted evening after evening."[2] Mason participated in this slow conveyance and deepening of Haitian tales through her jewelry, using certain motifs in endlessly imaginative variation.

According to *Ebony*, Mason's inspiration to work with her hands had emerged during her childhood in Brooklyn when her mother—an émigré from Saint Martin—taught her to sew, knit, and embroider.[3] These are artforms that often extend back across multiple generations of women as their hands moved in repetitive motion together, and these are also practices carried across waters on migratory journeys. Mason later enacted a reverse migration from that of her mother, seeking further embodied knowledge of the African Diaspora in the West Indies as a joyous and creative conduit, looking to the past and present to enact future change. The tactile experiences of Mason's investigations led to jewelry that sought to express freedom, and it adorned defiant visionaries such as Billie Holiday, who appeared in a photograph accompanying the *Ebony* article, wearing a Mason-designed necklace, cuff bracelet, and earrings while singing in a 52nd Street nightclub.[4]

1 Winifred Mason in interview in "Copper for Christmas", *Ebony* (December 1946), pp. 19–23.
2 Édouard Glissant, "On Haitian Painting", in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp. 155–57.
3 "Copper for Christmas".
4 Ibid.

During the early 1940s, Mason spent long hours in her Greenwich Village studio hammering lustrous biomorphic visions in copper of plant tendrils, sunbursts, and sea algae; *Ebony* described her as "possessed of a relentless energy that kept her working ten to fourteen hours a day."[5] Located on West Third Street next door to what is now the Blue Note Jazz Club, Mason was not far from New York University, where she had been a student of English Literature and Education in the 1930s. As fellow jewelry-maker Art Smith later recalled of working for Mason in this studio, in a neighborhood that was a "little Bauhaus possessed of compatible and interesting people", such as Talley Beatty, Ralph Ellison, and Gordon Parks.[6] Like these colleagues in an extended network of creativity that also included émigrés such as experimental filmmaker Maya Deren, Mason pushed the boundaries and technologies of her chosen medium. When her tools wouldn't stretch to her innovative purposes, she fabricated new ones, explaining in an interview: "A lot of jewelry that comes out of my shop is made with a simple ball peen hammer and other improvised tools [...] and it is because we depend so much on improvised tools and methods that our products have not been restricted to standard effects and designs."[7]

In 1945 Mason was awarded a grant through the Rosenwald Fund to "gather folk material and basic art patterns" in the Caribbean and to "express these feelings in jewelry."[8] Mason was among a significant group of women who received such grants for research in Africa and the West Indies, including Margaret Bonds, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus. Mason's chosen medium in metal makes her unique among this group of performing artist/anthropologists, yet her practice exists as part of the consistent migrations to and from the Caribbean archipelago that were formative for many Black modernists in New York. As painter Romare Bearden evocatively put it, "Art will go where the energy is. I find a great deal of energy in the Caribbean... It's like a volcano there; there's something unfinished underneath that still smolders."[9] And

5 Ibid.
6 Charles L. Russell, *Art as Adornment: The Life and Work of Arthur George Smith* (Parker: Outskirts Press, 2015), p. 41.
7 "Copper for Christmas".
8 Edwin R. Embree, *Julius Rosenwald Fund: Review for the Two-Year Period, 1944–1946* (Chicago, 1946), p. 25.
9 Sally Price and Richard Price, *Romare Bearden: The Caribbean Dimension* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

many, including Mason, were particularly inspired by Haiti's history of uprising; she reflected, "it seemed to me that people whose ancestors fought so valiantly for freedom must have a rich heritage."[10]

The exact details of Mason's journey to Haiti through her grant are uncertain; Marbeth Schon has suggested that she arrived in July of 1945 and spent five months on the island: "She was received by the president at that time, Élie Lescot, and touted in the Haitian press as '*une distinguée congénère*.'"[11] As was the case for so many local and visiting artists, Mason was impacted by the activities of the deeply influential Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince, which mounted a solo exhibition of her work in October of that year.[12] It was likely during this time that Mason met the Haitian artist and Centre d'Art co-founder Jean Chenet; within a few years the two married and also entered into a deeply productive creative relationship. From this time on, Mason signed her jewelry *chenet d'Haiti*, indicating the degree to which the country was central to her identity and the space from which she grounded her practice. As an artist working predominantly in copper, a metal that comes to the earth from massive stars that have exploded, the meaning of "chenet"—a type of andiron for a fireplace—would have surely held symbolic weight for Mason. Her brother-in-law, the Senegal-based artist Gerard Chenet, has poetically mused that "the family Chenet is an ancient family that practiced solar rituals."[13] The multi-layered, vibrant sunbursts that regularly formed a central motif in Mason's earrings, necklaces, and bracelets take on a deeper significance through their materiality in copper, alongside the Chenet name and history.

Gerard Chenet has also noted the role of Vodou within his family, specifically describing his mother's participation. And Jean's other brother, Jacques Chenet, has described how its symbols manifest in Mason's work: "Each Loa has a certain symbol called a vèvè. Using powdered chalk, vèvès were drawn on the ground before the Vodou ceremonies began. These are the symbols (the intricate designs) that

10 Margaret Mara, "Voodoo Doesn't Scare Her: Designer of Exotic Jewelry Finds Haiti Has a Thing or Two", *Brooklyn Eagle*, 28 June 1948, p. 11.

11 Marbeth Schon, "Winifred Mason: Extraordinary Coppersmith" *Modern Silver*, undated, online journal, no longer accessible, accessed on 6 June 2022.

12 Archives of the Centre d'Art, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

13 Author interview with Gerard Chenet, Toubab Dialaw, Senegal, 20 June 2016.

they used on their jewelry."[14] It is unclear if Mason was still in Haiti learning about these sources through the Chenets and others at the beginning of 1946, a significant moment in which other international artist-exiles arrived on the island and also engaged with Vodou practices and arts. Cuban artist Wifredo Lam exhibited a series of large canvases inspired by Afro-Caribbean religion at the Centre d'Art, and the leader of the surrealist movement, André Breton, also in the country, wrote of Lam's work in terms of vèvès, nature, and freedom: "the marvellous, ever-changing rays of light from the delicately worked stained-glass windows of tropical nature that fall upon a mind freed from all influences and predestined to make the images of the gods rise up out of these gleams of light."[15] It is of course also the case that Haitian artists engaged the vèvè at this time, including the painter André Pierre, a close colleague and Vodou informant for Maya Deren when she also arrived on the island in 1946. Art and politics were closely interconnected at this time; Breton's presence in Haiti served as a main inspiration for a popular uprising initiated by a collective associated with the Marxist student newspaper *La Ruche*; this rapidly spread and led to the overthrow of U.S.-backed Lescot. Gerard Chenet was a central figure in the student group and confirms that he met Breton; it is possible that these transformative dialogues and currents of political and aesthetic freedom also influenced the direction of Mason's work and her decision to adopt and adapt vèvès.[16]

Mason and Chenet's migrations between Haiti and New York had continued by 1948, when Chenet received an art history/arts administration fellowship through the Rockefeller Foundation. As Lindsay J. Twa has recounted, he studied with René d'Harnoncourt, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, and also carried out investigations at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, among other U.S. cultural institutions.[17] Around the same time, Mason opened a shop in her Greenwich Village studio called Haitian Bazaar, where she sold her jewelry and other hand-

14 Ibid; Jacques Chenet in interview with Marbeth Schon, *Modern Silver*, undated, online journal, no longer accessible.

15 André Breton, "Wifredo Lam: At Night in Haiti…", 9 January 1946, in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Artworks MFA Publications, 2002), p. 172.

16 Author interview with Gerard Chenet, Toubab Dialaw, Senegal, 20 June 2016.

17 Lindsay J. Twa, "The Rockefeller Foundation and Haitian Artists: Maurice Borno, Jean Chenet, and Luce Turnier", *Journal of Haitian Studies* 26/1 (Spring 2020), 37–71.

made items woven in Haiti. An extensive article about Mason and her store appeared in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and it combines an interest in the vogue of the hand-made items with a contrasting emphasis on the exotic or even dangerous, describing Mason's jewelry as inspired by a "mystic cult."[18] The title of the piece, "Voodoo Doesn't Scare Her: Designer of Exotic Jewelry Finds Haiti Has a Thing or Two", confirms the degree to which Vodou was perceived with both suspicion and condescension in the US. And Mason's jewelry certainly demonstrates some of the shifting, multi-faceted significations of the religion both within and outside of Haiti. On the one hand, her work was a commercial enterprise adapting and interpreting Vodou motifs for an international audience; she also sold her jewelry through department stores including Lord & Taylor and Bloomingdales. At the same time, her incorporation of the symbols exists within contemporaneous Haitian dialogues of sovereignty. As Twa has expressed it specifically of Chenet and his colleagues: "Haitian intellectuals believed that their nation could escape the straitjacket of European and US colonialism through the study and understanding of their folkways and African heritage."[19]

Mason particularly gravitated towards the depiction of two fundamental aspects of Vodou: nature and percussive sound. A beautiful example of the former is a pair of silver earrings that feature the vèvè of the Loa Loko—god of healing, plants, and trees—etched on round medallions that dangle from small, abstracted leaves.

Fig. 2 Winifred Mason, Silver earrings with Vodou vèvè. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

18 Mara, "Voodoo Doesn't Scare Her".
19 Twa, "The Rockefeller Foundation and Haitian Artists", p. 45.

The artist as spiritual conduit of the natural world had been explored by Chenet in a 1948 piece he co-authored on the Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite exploring his "double life" as an artist and Vodou priest. Hyppolite described himself as a healer with plants, and he states that to "be a good painter", one must "know plants."[20] Mason's consistent use of leaf motifs partakes of a similar synthesis of nature; in another set of earrings, she returns to the symbolism of Loko, this time with a leaf form mounted by an abstracted snake. Wonder in natural detail is typical to her work, as seen in a necklace of twenty-eight overlapping brass and copper leaves, each one bearing uniquely patterned details.

Mason's interest in evoking sound/rhythm is also apparent throughout her jewelry, both in its construction and its symbols. One bracelet and necklace design features round charms with etchings of multiple vèvè—from Erzulie to Agwé to Ayizan. When worn on the wrist, the charms would chime against each other, referencing the profound role of both sound and flashes of light as attractors of the Loa. And Mason repeatedly drew upon imagery of drums—from the abstracted cuff bracelet mentioned earlier, to figurative earrings and bracelets formed from small drum charms. By selecting this motif, Mason engages African ancestry; as Gèrdes Fleurant has described of the role of drums within Vodou:

> Drumming is the heartbeat of the *lakou* (Vodou community), and indeed according to its practitioners, it is the voice of the ancestors, for it leads to transcendence and propels the people to a level that connects to their roots in Africa.[21]

Mason may have also chosen the drum as a symbol of defiance. Her work in Haiti began not long after the formation of the Bureau d'Ethnologie, which sought to preserve and protect Vodou material culture against the destruction of anti-superstition campaigns that were exacerbated by the lengthy U.S. occupation; drums were particularly vulnerable during this time.

Throughout the 1950s, Mason and Chenet resided predominantly in Haiti, where Chenet was central to the founding of the Foyer des Arts

20 Phillipe Thoby-Marceline and Jean Chenet, "La double vie d'Hector Hyppolite: artiste et prêtre vodou', *Conjonction: bulletin de l'institut français de'Haïti* 16 (August 1948), 40–44.

21 Gèrdes Fleurant and Kate Ramsey, "A Vodou drum at the British Museum", British Museum Blog—Objects in Focus, 16 March 2018, https://blog.britishmuseum.org/a-vodou-drum-at-the-british-museum/.

Plastiques, a space to train artists outside of the perceived aesthetic restrictions of the Centre d'Art. As Marta Dansie and Abigail Lapin Dardashti have described, it made extensive room for expertise such as Mason's:

> [The Foyer] sought greater freedom in terms of training and experimentation than the Centre's emphasis on the "primitive" would allow [...] The Foyer not only included media traditionally associated with high art such as painting and sculpture, it also offered studio experience in jewelry, ceramics, woodworking, textiles, and basketry.[22]

However, counter to this sense of artistic freedom and innovation, the rise of the Duvalier dictatorship in the final years of the 1950s led to deep repression. Twa has uncovered documentation by the Rockefeller Foundation administrator John Marshall of a visit with Chenet and Mason in New York in 1959:

> Chenet related the disruption and falling-off of tourism that made it increasingly difficult to earn a living in Haiti through their jewelry. Additionally, the police intensely scrutinized the Chenets because of their etching and plating processes: authorities visited their shop periodically under the pretense of ensuring that they were not using acids and other casting equipment to make bombs.

"Their account of the situation in Haiti is indeed dismal. Everyone is afraid of everyone else", Marshall recorded. "They see no hope for improvement."[23] In horrific irony, Mason's jewelry and the "meanings and roots" that she sought to uncover and expand through her investigations in Haiti had become a tool of deep restriction, and subsequently worse. In 1963, Chenet was assassinated outside of their home by Duvalier's Tonton Macoute. Mason subsequently fled the country and is described as living a quiet life in the US until her death in an unknown year.

Mason's story and artistic production have received little in-depth analysis, perhaps in part due to the tragic outcome of her migration to Haiti: a violent silencing and exile. Yet her story, alongside that of Chenet, grows in resonance and recognition, and it continues to be recounted.

22 Marta Dansie and Abigail Lapin Dardashti, "Notes from the Archive: MoMA and the Internationalization of Haitian Painting, 1942–1948", MoMA Blog, Notes on Art in a Global Context, 3 January 2018, https://post.moma.org/notes-from-the-archive-moma-and-the-internationalization-of-haitian-painting-1942–1948/.

23 Twa, "The Rockefeller Foundation and Haitian Artists", p. 47.

Swiss-Haitian artist Sasha Huber has commemorated Chenet (who was her mother's godfather) through a 2014 portrait in her ongoing *Shooting Stars* series, while the Oakland, California-based contemporary metal artist Karen Smith has noted the influence of Mason on her practice. Smith reflects that Mason's "tenacity and verve cannot be dulled by her near erasure from historical record."[24] Mason's jewelry powerfully encompasses migrations, detours, and returns home, through cultural heritage transformed into adornment as a mode of celebration and resistance.

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24 Karen Smith, "The Desired Effect: Winifred Mason Chenet", We Wield the Hammer Blog, 7 November 2020, https://www.wewieldthehammer.org/blog/2020/the-desired-effect.

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