

ISABELLA
STEWART GARDNER
MUSEUM

EXPERIENCE A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY IN *WATERS OF THE ABYSS*:
AN INTERSECTION OF SPIRIT AND FREEDOM BY FABIOLA JEAN-LOUIS
AT THE ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM
With Haitian Culture and Spirituality as Inspiration,
Artist Transforms Paper Into Stunning Creations



Fabiola Jean-Louis (Haitian 1978 –), *All That Was and Nevermore*, 2024. Papier-mâché, paint on paper, crystals, resin enamel, sequins, beads, and mixed media decorations. ©2024 Fabiola Jean-Louis. Photo: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

Boston, MA (February 19, 2025) – [Waters of the Abyss: An Intersection of Spirit and Freedom](#) by Fabiola Jean-Louis takes visitors on a journey through the ancient and eternal, earthly and heavenly, personal and political. On view at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum from February 27 – May 25 (2025), the exhibition honors the culture and history of the artist's native Haiti, with many artworks serving as sacred portals to the “waters of the abyss” where, in Vodou, ancestral spirits reside. Using paper as her principal medium, Jean-Louis transforms the material into remarkable works of art including stone-like sculptures and lavish period garments.

Exhibition images here: <https://app.air.inc/a/ba6kwZMOL>

[*Waters of the Abyss: An Intersection of Spirit and Freedom*](#) reflects Jean-Louis's rediscovery of her Haitian roots and culture, encompassing the sanctity of Vodou and its role in the Haitian Revolution. On view in all three of the Museum's rotating exhibition spaces, the exhibition's journey begins upon arrival, where visitors are greeted by *Ayiti-Tomè* (meaning "from now onwards this land is our land"), a public art installation on the Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade. It continues in the Fenway Gallery, adjacent to the Museum's Courtyard, where Jean-Louis explores her personal history as it intersects with that of her homeland. The odyssey reaches its apex in the Hostetter Gallery, transfigured into imagined ruins of a sacred site hosting divine beings and spiritual symbols from Vodou tradition.

[*Waters of the Abyss: An Intersection of Spirit and Freedom*](#) consists of 41 of Jean-Louis's creations, most commissioned specifically for the exhibition. Jean-Louis perceives paper as a sacred medium, a receptor that holds "hopes, dreams, and proof of existence." Jean-Louis turns paper into a pulp that she then shapes into sculptural forms. The artist often incorporates materials that reflect light—like shells, mineral stones, glass, metals, and crystals—as a means of attracting and communicating with spirits. Quotes from the artist, translated into Kreyòl (Haitian Creole), are displayed on gallery walls.

"The Gardner Museum is pleased to present new works by contemporary artist and alchemist Fabiola Jean-Louis. Visitors will be mesmerized by Fabiola's metamorphosis of paper, transforming it into stunning two and three-dimensional treasures," says Peggy Fogelman, *Norma Jean Calderwood*

Director of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. “Just as Isabella Stewart Gardner installed sacred objects and altars throughout her Museum, Fabiola invites us to engage with global religious traditions as well as her own personal spiritual journey.”

Hostetter Gallery – In this gallery, a fictitious ruin of an ancient site emerges, hosting relics and spiritual symbols from Vodou tradition, bridging spiritual and human realms. (Vodou played a pivotal role in the Haitian Revolution [1791–1804] which overthrew French colonial rule, abolished slavery, and established the first independent Black republic.) For this exhibition, Jean-Louis centers this religion created by the enslaved people of Haiti that syncretized West African, Indigenous Caribbean, and Christian ritual practices.

The anteroom of Hostetter Gallery resembles a columbarium, a reverential funerary structure. This dimly-lit space houses 16 individual niches filled with precious artworks made of papier-mâché and softly illuminated. All of the objects—miniature tablets, offering bowls, and devotional vessels—and their surrounding alcoves, are part of Jean-Louis’s paper alchemy. Some of Jean-Louis’s vessels recall *govi*, sacred clay containers meant to hold the souls of the deceased. In *Ode to Merab: Study of Ateni Sioni Frescos* (2024), an angel holds a luminous conch shell to call people together to fight a common enemy.

This room also hosts two papier-mâché self-portrait busts—*Peregrine* (2024) and *Out of Obsidian* (2024)—in which the artist appears to merge and absorb lifeforce from Haiti’s landscape. In *Peregrine*, an angel-bird takes flight from a

mountain perch near a cascading waterfall, while flowers burst through hard (obsidian) rock in *Out of Obsidian*.



The main room of the Hostetter Gallery feels like a chapel, anchored by a large-scale, bejeweled sculpture titled *Lwa* inspired by Vodou *lwas* (angel spirits of innumerable divinities). Bathed in natural light, this towering *Lwa* (2021-22), with ornate gold crown and crimson robe, stands under an archway. This warrior angel meditates with closed eyes, gently holding out a sword—an invitation to take up the torch for freedom. *Lwa* is flanked by a pair of large papier-mâché urns, *Amphora Vessels* (2024), that incorporate driftwood, crushed glass, and pearls.

Fabiola Jean-Louis (Haitian 1978 –), *Lwa*, 2021–2022. Papier-mâché, with painted surfaces and applied abalone shells, glass, crystal, metal, and other mixed media. ©2024 Fabiola Jean-Louis. Photo: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

In the middle of the gallery, a *Celestial Portal* (2024) and pair of *Mermaid Portals* (2024) seem to have emerged from the sea, or “waters of the abyss.” In Vodou, the mermaid is a female *lwa* of the sea named La Sirene. One mermaid portal includes a mirror, suggesting that the path to the other side is inward, to first know yourself, while the other offers a lens to the world beyond us. Hundreds of

shells, some collected by Jean-Louis in Haiti, are meticulously placed on the tails, producing colorful undulating mosaics.

“I aim to create an immersive experience that transcends traditional art forms, inviting viewers to engage with the intersections of spirit, history, and identity in a way that is both profound and transformative,” explains Fabiola Jean-Louis. “By drawing on the rich spiritual and cultural heritage of Haiti, alongside the broader African diaspora, *Waters of the Abyss* seeks to bridge gaps in understanding and foster a greater appreciation for the complexities of Black identity and freedom.”

Along the perimeter of this gallery are four large portals, *An Entry Point to Heaven #1 – 4* (2024). Two of these sculptures (#2, 3) depict underwater realms, while the others (#1, 4) evoke rock cities carved into the side of a Haitian mountain or underwater cave. With an intentional resemblance to stone ruins across global cultures, such as Petra in present-day Jordan, Jean-Louis is portraying Haiti as an ancient civilization. In doing so, she writes a new, Afro-Futurist history, calling attention to the centuries of nobility, creativity, and energy in Haitian culture. As visitors walk through the gallery they may encounter the soft vibrato of ocean waves, bells and windchimes of *Ginen Zansèt* (Ancestors of Ginen), a sound piece compiled by Jean-Louis in collaboration with Architect Carl Damas that blends spiritual and emotional reflections with the eternal rhythms of nature.

Fenway Gallery – In this gallery, Jean-Louis shares a personal story, linking her own biography to the wider scope of Haitian history and ancestors. Two

self-portraits and two life-sized paper dresses look to the past to assert power for Black women now. Jean-Louis says, “There is something about how we understand the present and even the future when we go back in time.”

In *All That Was and Nevermore* (2024), Jean-Louis quietly meditates on her life and how it has shaped her sense of self. A vignette depicts her marrying a man on horseback in a Christian ceremony, while miniatures of three of her children, dressed in the style of privileged women and men living at the time of the Haitian Revolution, appear in gilded oval frames. Two *drapo* (ceremonial flags) salute the spirits that populate the Haitian landscape. In *The Avatar Knows* (2024), Jean-Louis’s eyes are open. *Dambala*, the snake *lwa* associated with ancient wisdom and creativity, glides around her shoulder. In the heavens, a female spirit holds a child, an icon that combines a Black Christian Virgin Mary cradling a baby Jesus with the Vodou Ezili Dantor, protector of mothers and children. Jean-Louis presents herself as a future ancestor, at peace with Haitian spiritual inheritance. Additionally, two small watercolor drawings accented with gold leaf and 24K gold—*The Alchemy of Belief* and *Ezili’s Command: By Ursa and Orion’s Light*—mark the beginning of a new body of work centered on illuminated manuscripts and themes of transformation and resilience.

Jean-Louis’s period dress, *Paradise Lost* (2024), reflects on the immeasurable losses inflicted on the enslaved, such as losing the right to honor ancestors with song and dance and the forced replacement of African-centered spiritual practices with Christian rituals. Jean-Louis originally wore this ensemble (a previous version created in 2020)—bright red dress with gold accents and

ornate gold headpiece with cross at center, surrounded by rosettes—in a single photograph, part of a series of self-portrait photographs called *Atonement* that remains unfinished. The dress evokes impermanence, fear, guilt—stemming from Jean-Louis's years in Catholic school, which distanced her from the Vodou practices of her ancestors.

Another garment on view, *Justice of Ezili* (2021), was commissioned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and featured in their exhibition [Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room](#). (Jean-Louis was the first Haitian, female artist to be exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum.) This adaptation of an 18th-century corset dress features a gilded brooch at the neck portraying the *Iwa Ezili Dantor*. The wearer of this regal dress represents the spirit of justice and vengeance.

“It is exciting to be able to share this massive immersive series of forty new works with visitors to Boston,” says Pieranna Cavalchini, *Tom and Lisa Blumenthal Curator of Contemporary Art*. “It represents many years of the artist's cultural research and spiritual reflection and to see it slowly and persistently come together over the past two years has been magnificent and awe-inspiring.”

Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade – The Museum's Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade presents *Ayiti-Tomè* (2025), which means “from now onwards this land is our land” in Fon, a language spoken by the African enslaved people who won independence in the Haitian Revolution. In this installation, Jean-Louis synthesizes distinct and interconnected elements of Haitian and African diasporic cultures and symbols

to reflect a unified, complex identity. The artist merges different source materials—photographs from recent visits to Haiti with early versions of sculptures on view in the exhibition. This public work of art is a visual testament to the complex tapestry of Haitian culture and history.

Public Programs – The Gardner will present a range of programs exploring Haitian culture, history, and identity, including a special community celebration taking place in honor of Haitian Flag Day, during Haitian Heritage Month in May. Highlights are below and more information at: gardnermuseum.org/calendar.

Fabiola Jean-Louis on the Art of Black Liberation

Thurs., February 27, 7 – 8:15 pm; Calderwood Hall

Arielle Gray—WBUR reporter and arts engagement producer, and Gardner Museum Luminary—talks with Jean-Louis about how she transforms paper into profoundly spiritual sculptures that connect ancestral and living realms and reclaim African spirituality. They will discuss the artist's creative processes and how her art bridges past and present, engaging with colonial histories and African diasporas in the Caribbean and beyond. Jean-Louis will share how she draws on a range of folkloric, literary, mythical, and historic references from Vodou traditions and spirituality to the powerful history of the Haitian Revolution that continues to resonate in legacies of Black liberation.

The Art of Transformation: Black Spirituality, Self-Expression, and Identity

Thursday, March 20, 7 – 8:15 pm; Calderwood Hall

Fabiola Jean-Louis, along with leading scholars and faith leaders Reverend Irene Monroe, Elena Herminia Guzman, and Dr. Brandon Crowley, join Rebecca L.

Hey-Colón for a conversation exploring the intersections of non-binary and queer cultures, Afro-Diasporic religions and spirituality, and the gender fluidity of mythical, legendary, and folkloric beings that form a part of these traditions. This dialogue and communal reflection will honor the confluence of transformation and religious practices as avenues for self-expression and identity. This program is supported by the Henry Luce Foundation.

Celebrating Culture: Haitian Heritage & Community
Thursday, May 15, 7 – 8:15 pm; Calderwood Hall

This special evening includes live music, dance, and poetry in honor of Haitian Flag Day and Haitian Heritage Month. A performance by contemporary dance company Jean Appolon Expressions, conceived and choreographed by Gardner Artist-in-Residence Jean Appolon in conjunction with the current exhibition, will explore themes of hope and pride.

Publication – In conjunction with the exhibition, the Gardner Museum has produced [WATERS OF THE ABYSS: AN INTERSECTION OF SPIRIT & FREEDOM](#). This 128-page hardcover catalogue includes photographs of many artworks featured in the exhibition, along with writing by Jean-Louis, Edwidge Danticat (Artist-in-Resident, 1999), Peggy Fogelman and Pieranna Cavalchini.

Fabiola Jean-Louis – Multi-disciplinary artist and visual activist working in paper, textile design, sculpture, photography, and film, Jean-Louis was born (1978) in Port Au Prince, Haiti, and moved as a child to Brooklyn, NY, where she continues

to live and work. Her Afro-Surrealist oeuvre frequently explores spirituality, history, and the expansive complexities of Blackness. Learn more in this recent [video](#).

A Gardner Museum [Artist-in-Residence](#), Jean-Louis has also been awarded residencies at Museum of Arts and Design (New York, NY) and the University of Central Arkansas. Jean-Louis's exhibition, [Rewriting History](#), which took place at the Gardner Museum (Fenway Gallery) in 2023 and at the DuSable Black History Museum (Chicago IL) in 2018, featured a life-size dress crafted entirely from paper surrounded by lush photographs of women of color in the costumes and settings of 17th–19th century European nobility. In addition to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jean-Louis's work has also been shown at the [Andrew Freedman Home](#) (Bronx, NY).

Support

Waters of the Abyss: An Intersection of Spirit and Freedom is supported in part by Barbara and Amos Hostetter, the Barr Foundation, Wagner Foundation, and the Barbara Lee Program Fund.

The Artist-in-Residence program is directed by Pieranna Cavalchini, *Tom and Lisa Blumenthal Curator of Contemporary Art*. Funding is also provided for site-specific installations of new work on the Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade on Evans Way.

The Museum receives operating support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, which is supported by the state of Massachusetts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum invites you to escape the ordinary in a magical setting where art and community come together to inspire new ways of envisioning our world. Embodying the fearless legacy of its founder, the Museum offers a singular invitation to explore the past through a contemporary lens, creating meaningful encounters with art and joyful

connections for all. Modeled after a Venetian palazzo, unforgettable galleries surround a luminous Courtyard and are home to masters such as Rembrandt, Raphael, Titian, Michelangelo, Whistler, and Sargent. The Renzo Piano wing provides a platform for contemporary artists, musicians, and scholars and serves as an innovative venue where creativity is celebrated in all of its forms.

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum • 25 Evans Way, Boston, MA 02115 • Hours: Open Weekends from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Weekdays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursdays until 9 p.m. Closed Tuesdays. • Admission: Adults \$22; Seniors \$20; Students \$15; Free for members, children under 18, everyone on their birthday, and all named "Isabella" • \$2 off admission with a same-day Museum of Fine Arts, Boston ticket • For information 617 566 1401 • Box Office 617 278 5156 • www.gardnermuseum.org

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