

Joyce Kozloff: I.S. 218, New York

"Caribbean Festival Arts," I.S. 218, Board of Education of the City of New York, NYC School Construction Authority and NYC Department of Cultural Affairs % for Art Program; Richard Dattner & Associates, Architects; fabricated by Miotto Mosaics, Carmel, NY and Trivisanutto Mosaics, Spilimbergo, IT; photos Kevin Noble

Since most of the students at I.S. 218 are Caribbean, the artwork centers on Afro-Caribbean festival art and island architecture, a frieze of Vodoun characters posing frontally across a wall saturated with the turquoise of the sea as a backdrop. The combination of motifs, patterns and images is dreamlike and fantastical, like a series of disjointed memories of other places and times. It hovers on the façade of the school, with Fort Tryon Park looming above.

The Caribbean popular wooden house (case), rich or poor, can have decorative balconies or verandas, gabled roofs, painted shutters and fences. Island styles vary, influenced by different former colonial rulers, but are strongly African in their graphic patterns and bright hues. The lower horizontal border is a compilation of details from ornament characteristic of the gingerbread style. White, lacy linear patterns set up a color idea carried throughout the rest of the piece.

Reading across the field from left to right: on the far left, a Haitian "tap tap" (fancifully painted bus) emerges above the bottom border. Over it is the mask of a Moco Jumbie (West African stilt dancer). Then comes Pitchy Patchy, whose costume is formed by fabric strips sewn onto his shirt and pants that sway as he dances in sweeping gestures. Next is a Gombey performer from Bermuda in Amerindian masquerade. His cape, apron and pants are covered with sequins, mirrors, ribbons, bells and fringes, and he carries a hatchet, bow and arrows, and wears white globes; his elaborate headdress is topped with peacock feathers. He is followed by a character who predominates in Dominican festivals, richly decorated with a multiple horned headdress (African in origin), wildly swinging animal bladders (from European carnival).

In the center, there is a composite structure made of lattices, windows, gates and shutters with a peaked roof most common to Haitian houses. To the right is the dynamic figure of John Canoe (Jonkonnu), a dashing young man and superior dancer. He wears part military attire, a whiteface mask, large wig and hat, and on his head, carries a pasteboard houseboat covered with spangles,

mirrors, beads and tinsel. The Flower Girl from turn-of-the century Belize is to his right. She was traditionally performed by a man and appeared with male figures in quasi-military costume. Her headdress is made of paper flowers, mirrors, sequins, feathers and streamers.

The last group begins, in the foreground, with a contemporary Dominican horned mask. The "tadja" (mosque-like form) is part of the Hosay Festival In Trinidad, which celebrates Muharram (the first day of the Muslim year). Indentured servants were brought to the islands from India in the nineteenth century, after the end of slavery. This structure is a replica of the domed tomb of Imam Husain at Karbala, whose martyrdom the holiday commemorated. It is now celebrated by islanders of all ethnicities. The "tadjah" is later brought out to sea. Above at the upper right is Horsehead, a fierce character who chases members of the audience. Made from a mule's skull with articulated jaw and attached to a pole, he has antecedents in rural England and parts of Mali.

Excerpts from Caribbean Festival Arts by John W. Nunley and Judith Bettelheim, Seattle, WA: The University of Washington Press, 1988.