

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Bonnie Franklin: bfrankli@ramapo.edu or Rosa Diaz-Mulryan: rmulryan@ramapo.edu

January 11, 2006

**HISTORIC EXHIBITION AT RAMAPO COLLEGE FEATURES SELF-
TAUGHT ARTISTS FROM THE CENTRE D'ART IN HAITI
Drawn From the Private Collection of Film Director Jonathan Demme**

(Mahwah) – *An Apparently Unimportant Event: Self-Taught from the Centre d'Art in the 1940s and 50s* will open in the Kresge and Pascal Galleries on the campus of Ramapo College Wednesday, January 31 and continue through March 7. An opening reception will be held January 31 from 5 – 7 p.m. A curator's talk will begin at 6 p.m.

Drawn from the private collection of film director Jonathan Demme, this historic exhibition features renowned Haitian artists brought to the fore by American critic and Ramapo College donor Selden Rodman while he was co-director of the Centre d'Art in Haiti. Included are such masters as Hector Hyppolite, Philome Obin, Wilson Bigaud and Castera Bazile.

Dr. Kristine Juncker of Vassar College, who authored the exhibit's catalog and will co-chair the first-ever session on Caribbean art this February at the 2007 College Art Association Annual Conference, explains, "In the 1940s and 50s an important movement of art emerged in Haiti. The most prominent leaders of this movement were part of an organization called the Centre d'Art located in the capital city of Port-au-Prince. Notably, until the end of the twentieth century the widespread interest in so-called 'Primitivism' in Western-European twentieth-century art overshadowed interpretations of the work created by the Centre d'Art. Following prevailing notions of modern art in Europe and the United States, critics quickly labeled the work produced by Haitian artists

(more)

in the 1940s and 1950s as ‘primitive’ or ‘naïve.’ This exhibition reconsiders the art movement established by the Centre d’Art. Using a variety of media, the self-taught and highly skilled artist members carved out an alternative movement of modernist art in Haiti and set standards for succeeding generations of Haitian artists.”

The exhibition is curated by Pebo Voss, who has worked with Demme’s collection for ten years. As to the exhibit’s title, Voss explains, “DeWitt Peters, the founder of the Centre d’Art, wrote in his 1968 memoir that the founding of the Centre was ‘an apparently unimportant event’ the day, in late 1944, that a painting arrived from Philome Obin.” He had not anticipated that there might be anyone doing this kind of work in Haiti, and once he saw the work of Obin, he started looking for other work by untrained artists. The exhibition looks at the creative explosion that followed once the founders started looking for autodidactic artists and accepting those who came to the Centre to share their work.

To complement the Demme collection, a small selection of works by artists associated with the Centre d’Art from Carole Rodman’s (widow of Selden) private collection will be on view in the Pascal Gallery.

Demme first became enamored with Haitian art on a trip there in 1987. The director has made his private collection public for numerous projects. Significant collection exhibitions include the Bass Museum of Art in Miami, Florida and The Equitable Gallery, New York.

Demme and Rodman brought the exhibit, *Haiti: Three Visions*, to the college in 1994 and Demme and Voss brought *Odilon Pierre: Atis d’Ayiti* to the Selden Rodman Gallery of Popular Arts in 2005.

Several events will be held in conjunction with *An Apparently Unimportant Event: Self-Taught from the Centre d’Art in the 1940s and 50s*. A lecture, “Winds of the Spirit: Haitian Vodun Art,” by Yale University art historian Dr. Robert Farris Thompson will be presented Thursday, February 1 at 8 p.m. in the Sharp Theater on the college campus. In his book, *Flash of the Spirit*, Thompson describes vodun, first elaborated in Haiti, as having “inspired a remarkable tradition of sacred art.” Thompson is regarded as

one of the world's most significant African art historians and is renowned for his compelling lectures. Admission to the lecture is free.

There will also be a reading and book signing by Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat Friday, February 23 at 1 p.m. in the Berrie Center. She has participated in three exhibits with Jonathan Demme. She is the author of *Krik? Krak!* (Soho Press, 1995), a collection of short stories about Haiti and Haitian-Americans longing for political freedoms and democracy. *Krik? Krak!* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1995. She also authored *The Dew Breaker* and *The Farming of Bones*.

In addition, *La Cueilleuse de Fleurs*, an oil painting by Hector Hyppolite on display, will be donated by Jonathan Demme to the college's permanent collection.

This program is made possible in part by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ramapo College Foundation.

The Kresge and Pascal Galleries are located in the Berrie Center for Performing and Visual Arts at Ramapo College. Hours are Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 1 to 5 p.m. and Wednesday, 1 to 7 p.m. The Selden Rodman Gallery of Popular Arts, will be open Tuesday from 1 – 4:30 p.m. and Wednesday from 1 – 7 p.m. For more information, call 201.684.7147.

###