



JULIEN SINZOGAN
SPIRIT WORLDS





Photograph : Jonathan Greet

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The artist, Julien Sinzogan, was born and grew up in Benin, today a small west-African country situated between the larger states of Nigeria and Ghana. Formerly known as Dahomey (*Danhomè*) this region was governed by the warlike Fon tribe, whose thirteen, hereditary kings controlled, between 1600 and 1900, a broad territory ranging from North of their inland capital of Abomey right down to the Atlantic coast. Revealingly, this stretch of coastline, marked on western maps as the 'Slave Coast', was a primary destination for European trading vessels. Having delivered their consignments to other ports, the unladen ships were tasked to take aboard cargoes of African men, women and children who would then be sold abroad as slaves. These human cargoes were often the fall-out from inter-tribal conflicts that saw bellicose peoples, such as the Yoruba, Fon, Ashante, Mbangala, etc. round up sufficient captives every year to sell on to the indiscriminating white traders in exchange for guns, alcohol and other sought-after western products. Dahomey's coastal towns of Ouidah (Whydah), Cotonou and Porto Novo became major trading centres during the complex and turbulent 400-year long history of the transatlantic slave trade, which dates from the early 1500s – when Portuguese vessels first appeared in the Bay of Guinea – to the late 1900s when the terrible trade was

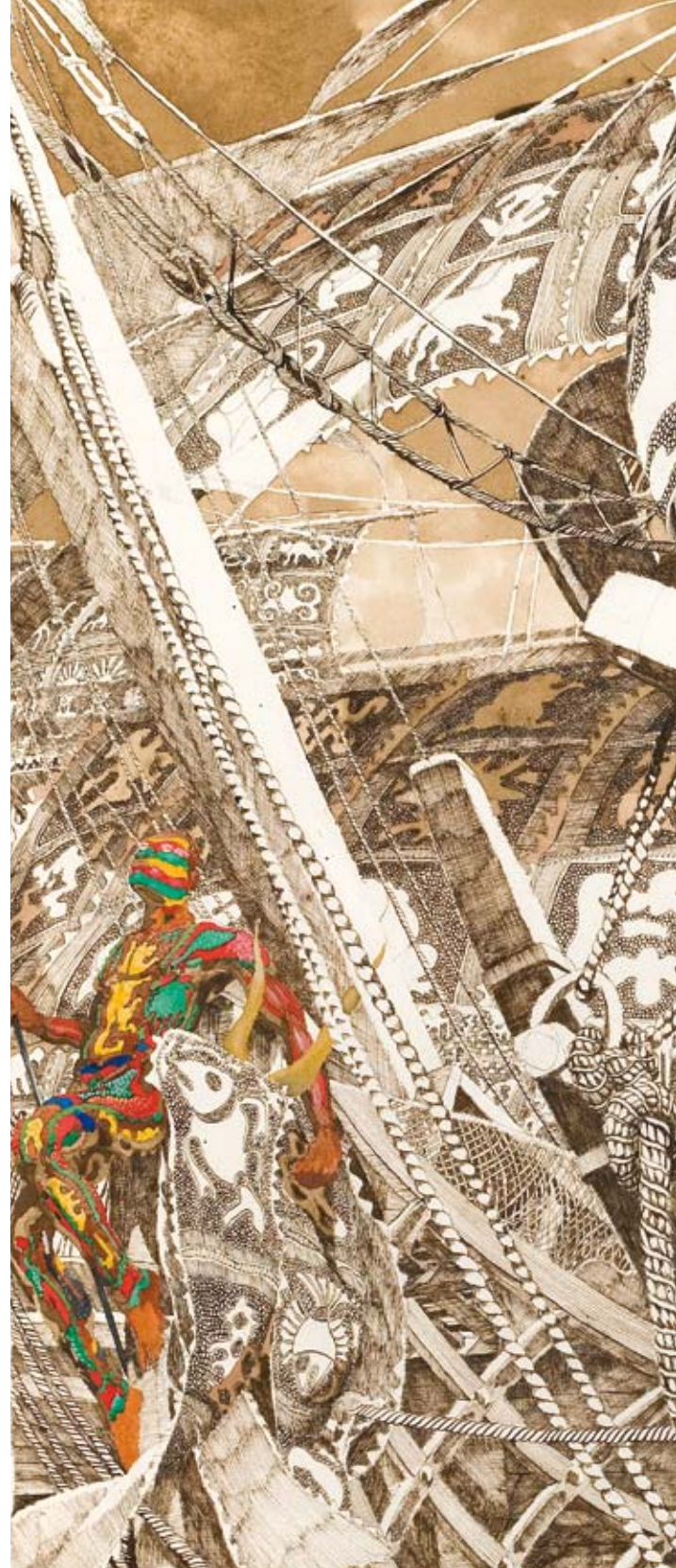
finally halted. It is estimated that between 8 and 12 million Africans were captured around the continent before being forcibly transported across the Atlantic under indescribably brutal conditions. Those 'fortunate' enough to survive the dreadful perils of the 'middle passage' were then sold into slavery in the Americas and Caribbean where, under appalling conditions of servitude, they laboured to fulfil the insatiable demands for cotton, coffee, sugar and cocoa that gripped Europe between the 17th and 19th Centuries. The 'free labour' of these captured African slaves helped fill, to overflowing, the European venture capitalists' coffers – leaving a shameful blot on the escutcheons of those European families whose fortunes were founded on the inhumanities of this cruelly asymmetric trade. The ruthless and co-ordinated efficiency of the perpetrators still ranks the African diaspora as the largest ever movement of displaced peoples in history.

Britain recently commemorated, in 2007, the bicentenary of the Parliamentary abolition of the slave trade to somewhat muted response, since not only did slaving continue, almost unabated, for several decades beyond 1807, but it also became apparent how little Britons understood the history of those times and the manner in which national progress and prosperity were directly related to the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas. Conversely, continuing African impoverishment today can equally be seen as in direct proportion to the centuries-long leaching away of significant swathes of her youngest, most

energetic inhabitants to killing fields on foreign soils. Sinzogan adds the rider that it is likewise possible to grow up today in Benin, and other parts of Africa, understanding little or nothing about African complicity in the atrocities of the slave-trading era, remembering that he himself knew little of the historical realities until invited to participate in the Ouidah '92 Festival. Celebrated in 1993, this First International Festival of the Arts and Cultures of Voudun was a collaboration between UNESCO and the Beninese government that brought together local west-African artists and artists from the African diaspora whose ancestors had been sold into slavery. Sinzogan continues 'It came as a complete eye-opener! to meet these incredible artists - like the Cuban Manuel Mendive, and Edouard Duval Carrié from Haiti. We spent some intense times with each other, talking, working, singing, drumming and dancing together whilst excitedly exploring our common yet separate inheritances. When I heard their stories I was shocked! I had no idea at all about the things they'd lived through, or the places they came from – and yet we all shared a set of living traditions. They had come to Benin, to my home, to celebrate the place from which their ancestors had been taken, and to encounter it for the very first time. It was an incredibly moving experience, and each one of us wanted to render homage to those shared ancestors' stories and to recover some of the lost details of that incredible history of departure and return'. Since 1993, Sinzogan has devoted his work to recognising, remembering and re-presenting the sights, scenes and shared histories of those almost forgotten times, and attempting to combat the dangers of mutual misunderstanding.

To appreciate Sinzogan's work requires a passing familiarity with ideas found amongst west-African peoples such as the Yoruba, Nago, Ewe and Fon, ideas generally stemming from the *Voudun* religion that is common to many indigenous groups in the region. Wole Soyinka, the well-known Nigerian Nobel Laureate, talks about 'the cyclical reality' of the 'Yoruba world-view' which

Plate 2.





Laboza

sees each human being arriving from the world of the Unborn, and transiting this human world before, at death, exchanging this earthly existence for a 'life-beyond' (*Èhìn-Ìwà*) and returning to the spirit world again. In this after-world spirits who have led meritorious lives become an *Egun* or 'ancestor' figure and are remembered and venerated by their earthly descendants. A spirit who has not led a good life, however, is left floating above the haunts of men in a disembodied state, lost in an indeterminate part of the 'abyss of transition' and tormented by the lack of any hope of release. Our material world and the spirit-world of heaven (*Òrun*) co-exist and rub shoulders with each other, although the spirits remain invisible to us. Periodically, however, during the *Egungun* masquerades, the ancestor spirits manifest in the human world where they interact with those descendants who remember them. These elaborate masquerades, where members of the secret societies incarnate *Egungun* spirits, form a principal part of the annual cycle of ceremonies. Here the important lineage ancestors 'return', wearing richly embroidered costumes and masks to cloak their identities, (Plate 4.) performing dynamic, whirling dances (Plate 5. and Plate 19.) as they ritually renew the compacts governing the relations between the spirits and their living descendants.

Spirit Worlds (Plate 12. and Plate 13.) indicates some of the complexities of this world-view, for the right-hand tableau, *Those of Ifè*, depicts the highest deities in the Yoruba pantheon, inhabiting *Òrun*, in the skies above. The supreme

god, Almighty *Olorun*, the Owner of the Sky, is shown together with the original creator goddess *Olokun*. Curving around them both is the Fon deity, *Dan Aidohuedho*, the 'rainbow serpent' and messenger of the gods. Below them can be seen many other *orishas*, or gods, of the voodoo pantheon: *Shango*, the thunder god, with his double axe; *Sakpata*, the ruler of the Earth, whose weapon is smallpox, and whose body is pitted with the marks of that disease; the female deity *Gbaadu*, goddess of knowledge, carrying a calabash on her head, next to her husband, *Orunmila*, the spirit of wisdom and patron of the *Ifa* system of divination, and *Yemadja*, ('Mother whose children are as plentiful as fish') shown with her feet in the water, who links the heavenly world with the watery deeps. Finally, the colourful band of spirits closest to the water's edge represents the *Egungun*, easily identified by their distinctive costumes, former denizens of earth who now live splendidly with the deities in *Òrun*. The left-hand tableau, *Those on High*, however, describes those spirits unworthy of returning whence they originally came. These spirits exist floating near to the heavens but unable to sail high enough ever to return there. They inhabit a separate reality from where they can only look down upon the earth, but can never interact with it – remaining unsatisfied, invisible to and ignored by those now left below. Sinzogan's beautiful *trompe-l'oeil* device renders fleetingly visible these spirits' emblazoned bodies as a flock of living birds soars amongst the gliding forms, outlining, here, an arm, there, a camouflaged torso, and beyond, a floating leg (see also Plate 11.).





Yet it is with the visionary works of naval architecture, the phantom caravelles and frigates in coloured pen and ink that Sinzogan's name is most intimately connected. In an inspired act of historical re-imagination he has re-appropriated the savage histories of the 'Guineamen' slave-ships and redrawn them using the same cyclical laws of metaphysical transformation that Soyinka describes. The monochromatic phantom brigs have been re-possessed by the liberated captives, and the long-dead slaves, now clothed in the solemn pomp of *Egungun* costumes crowd the decks as the ships retrace their agonising route, now Eastwards, back through the abyssal passage that leads to the shores from which they were so brutally torn. Colours first appear in the figureheads, African forms displacing the bare-breasted, apotropaic carvings of western slave-ships, transfigured into local orishas, known deities of the voodoo pantheon. These guiding spirits – psychopomps – often holding the *assen* symbols that represent portable altars dedicated to the returning ancestors, call phantom winds to swell the square-rigged sails with colour. First the top-gallants at the highest points of the masts and eventually the entire press of canvas becoming filled with the *Egungun* symbols that represent the houses of each one of the spirit revenants. As the ships approach the West African coastline the whole canopy of sail is resplendent with bright glyphs, and the spirits – bedecked in the same livery - throng the decks to catch a first sight of the longed-for shores of home. The penultimate scene in Sinzogan's startling treatment of the transfigured spirits' return – sees them disembarking into long-boats to be carried back to the sandy beaches from where they were rowed into exile. Their statuesque and muscled descendants, in scenes reminiscent of Doré, restrain with batons their eagerness to re-enter the world they'd lost, since their slightest touch would harm the living. The final scene in Sinzogan's nautical series always presents the abandoned hulks of the phantom barques ship-wrecked on the African shore and reduced to monochromatic hulks devoid of all vital and spiritual energies.



