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NORTHWESTERN'S BLOCK MUSEUM'S 'CARAVANS OF GOLD' SHOWS WEST AFRICA'S GLOBAL REACH



“Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time; Art, Culture and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa” is the first major exhibition to highlight West Africa’s global reach in the 8th to 16th centuries by looking directly at its material remains. The exhibit, which features loans from Mali, Morocco and Nigeria, is at Northwestern University’s Block Museum of Art through July 21.

Unlike the more traditional art museum focus on masterworks grouped between historical periods

and geographic areas, “Caravans of Gold” juxtaposes fragments of artworks across regions and time.

An extraordinary cast copper sculpture from Nigeria and a carved ivory sculpture from France together comprise just one example of interdependent materials.

Analysis of the copper used for the seated 13th-14th century figure found at Tada, Nigeria, suggests that it may have originated in France, along the very trade routes to Ife, the royal Nigerian capital where it was cast. Meanwhile, a Virgin and Child carved in France around 1275-1300, on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, could only have been made from the tusk of a savanna elephant.

And a thumbnail-sized fragment of Chinese porcelain unearthed from the medieval trading center of Tadmekka, Mali, is displayed next to a complete 12th-century Qingbai bowl from China – its exact match in color and material.

“The legacy of medieval trans-Saharan exchange has largely been omitted from Western historical narratives and art histories, and certainly from the way that Africa is presented in art museums,” said Kathleen Bickford Berzock, associate director of cura-

torial affairs at the Block. “‘Caravans of Gold’ has been conceived to shine a light on Africa’s pivotal role in world history through the tangible materials that remain.”

Berzock worked closely on the exhibit with an interdisciplinary advisory team of art history, archaeology, history and comparative literature specialists working in sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and Europe. She was curator of African art at the Art Institute of Chicago before coming to the Bloc.

“The richness of our collections has made us a very important resource for telling the story of Africa’s significant contribution toward civilization,” said Yusuf Usman, former director general of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria and a contributor to the ‘Caravans of Gold’ publication.

Manuscripts from Timbuktu, Mali, also emphasize the role that the shared culture and language of Islam played in the expansion of African exchange networks.

A key figure in the story of sub-Saharan trade is Mansa Musa, the 14th-century king of the Empire of Mali. His kingdom controlled access to one of the most productive gold regions in the world. During his pilgrimage to the Islamic holy city of Mecca, his caravan reportedly carried 100 loads of gold, which he distributed on his way to and from the holy site.

The exhibit contains an unprecedented number of loans from the national collections of Mali, Morocco and Nigeria, never before seen in the United States. The collection will travel to the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto next fall and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. in spring 2020.

Located at 40 Arts Circle Drive on Northwestern’s Evanston campus, the Block Museum is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday and Friday; closed Monday. Admission is free. www.block-museum.northwestern.edu

—Suzanne Hanney, from prepared materials

LEFT: Virgin and Child, ca. 1275-1300, France, Ivory with paint, 26.8 x 16.5 x 12.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917. BELOW: Seated Figure, Possibly Ife, Tada Nigeria, Late 13th-14th century, Copper with traces of arsenic, lead, and tin, Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments. Photos provided by The Block Museum of Art.

