

*Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time:  
Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*

Frequently Asked Questions & Fact Sheet

**Venues / Dates:**

The Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL  
January 26, 2019 - July 21, 2019

The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada  
September 21, 2019 – February 23, 2020

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC  
April 8 – November 29, 2020

**1. Why will audiences care about this exhibition?**

With the exhibition we are inviting audiences to expand their perceptions past medieval knights and castles by journeying with us to a medieval world with Africa at its center. Our story provides a glimpse to a world where Islam, Christianity, and African cultures meet and circulate at the crossroads of the Saharan trade routes, and where wealthy African empires and commercial centers offer riches and technology beyond any seen in the world.

The exhibition overturns assumptions about African history and repositions African states and peoples as not only embedded in, but central to global networks of exchange in the medieval world; challenges common notions of Africa as a place isolated from the rest of the world and without history; and will have students asking why this important history, these stories, are relatively unknown and untaught.

**2. Why does Medieval Africa matter today?**

*Caravans of Gold* portrays how Africa was central to global networks of exchange in the medieval period and in doing so it challenges notions of historic Africa as isolated from the rest of the world. African history before the slave trade is a subject that has been largely left out of world history, out of our education system, and out of our collective imagination. A

reconsideration of popular beliefs about the medieval world provides the groundwork for understanding the present in new ways.

### **3. What is in the exhibition?**

*Caravans of Gold* presents more than 250 artworks and fragments that span six centuries and a vast geographic expanse. The works come from across West Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, and together they weave a story of multi-directional and global networks of trade in the medieval period. Included are treasures of the medieval period on loan from institutions in West Africa. From Mali there are terracotta sculptures, manuscripts from Timbuktu, and rare fragments from important archaeological sites. From Nigeria are iconic cast copper and brass sculptures from Ife and Igbo Ukwu. From Morocco are gold coins and materials excavated from the city of Sijilmasa, including a unique and exquisite gold ring.

### **4. Why is this exhibition in an art museum?**

It's important for art museums to find ways to present and celebrate histories and art histories that are difficult to access. In this case, the material legacy of medieval Africa and of trans-Saharan trade has become fragmented over time. This is one of the reasons there has never been a major American art exhibition on medieval West Africa. The exhibition uses the strategies of the art museum to focus our gaze on these fragmented remains and to connect them with works of art which are then seen in a new light. In doing so the exhibition juxtaposes works of art that have never been seen together before.

### **5. Why is this exhibition at Northwestern University?**

*Caravans of Gold* is a project that arises organically from Northwestern's multi-disciplinary strengths and global reach. The University is home to the nation's first Program of African Studies founded in 1947, as well as the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, founded in 1954 and today the largest separate Africana collection in existence. The University is also home to NU-Access (the Northwestern-Art Institute of Chicago Center for Scientific Studies in the Arts), which pursues objects-based and objects-inspired scientific research and the Buffett Institute for Global Studies, which works to solve critical global problems through collaborative scholarship and education. The Buffett Institute is a major supporter of the exhibition's international partnerships.

### **6. The question has been raised recently, most notably in the movie *Black Panther* and at the Brooklyn Museum, about who should be responsible for teaching / curating African art. What do you think?**

The movie / the protests at Brooklyn raise important questions for our time. One of the benefits of this is the attention this has brought to the work of Africanist curators, and to exhibitions that engage with African art. The exhibition *Caravans of Gold* has been developed in consultation with an international group of advisors, each experts in a specialized area that contributes to the big picture that the exhibition conveys. It has also emerged in partnership with institutions and individuals in Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria. In this type of project the exhibition curator's role is as project manager-- to consult, gather, compile, and convey all of this in a manner that its accessible for a general public.

**7. What do you think about questions that are being raised today about the repatriation of African art to Africa?**

Many important questions are being asked today that are raising public awareness about African art and its history. It's true that the collecting of African art is tied to the history of colonialism. This also has an impact on the kinds of stories that are told in museums about Africa, which focus largely on Africa from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. *Caravans of Gold* is important at this time because it introduces a history that predates both colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade.

**8. Where are the works in the exhibition from? Who "owns" them?**

*Caravans of Gold* highlights collections from Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria. It is notable that most of the medieval objects from Africa that are in the exhibition are on loan from African institutions, and these are supplemented by loans from North American museums. Many of the objects from Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria have never traveled outside of their home countries. Through these rare loans, the exhibition brings attention to the importance of cultural heritage protection in Africa. Finally, the exhibition includes the voices of specialists from Africa in telling the story of medieval trans-Saharan trade.

**9. Has the museum connected directly with Africa to develop the exhibition?**

In developing *Caravans of Gold* The Block Museum has worked with specialists internationally for seven years, including archaeologists and partner institutions in Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria. A grant from Northwestern's Buffett Institute for Global Studies has supported partnerships on the African continent, which has required travel of The Block staff to those countries and of African colleagues to campus. Loans from Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria are highlighted in the exhibition. The exhibition's curator will teach a course at Northwestern in which students will contribute to preparing the exhibition's content to be shared with these partner countries when the loans are returned at the close of the exhibition tour.

**10. Does *Caravans of Gold* look at the history of trans-Saharan slavery?**

The capture and enslavement of West Africans and their forced movement across the Sahara Desert is part of the history of trans-Saharan trade in the medieval period. There are no

material remains of this history, but it is recorded in Arabic language accounts from the period. The exhibition calls attention to this in the *Saharan Frontiers* section. It also conveys that Trans-Saharan slavery continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Morocco the descendants of enslaved West Africans call themselves Gnawa. The exhibition's *Saharan Echoes* section draws attention to this through the display of Gnawa musical instruments.

### **11. Who are the audiences for this exhibition?**

Running January 26, 2019 through July 21, 2019, The Block Museum anticipates wide audiences for the exhibition. It will attract visitors interested in topics including global and medieval history, Africa, Global Affairs, art and art history, and archaeology. The Block offers free admission, free school and community tours, and will be launching a major *Caravans of Gold* curricular collaboration with local Chicago Public Schools, Evanston Township High School and District 65 Schools to ensure that students have the opportunity to visit.

### **12. Where will the exhibition travel?**

The exhibition will travel from The Block Museum of Art to the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto in September 2019 and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., in April 2020. These three institutions; a University art museum, a museum of Islamic culture, and a museum of African art, provide three unique angles for considering the expansive and wide-ranging story of *Caravans of Gold*.

### **13. What is the Aga Khan Museum's connection to the Aga Khan and Ismaili Islamic sect? Why is the museum a good venue for the exhibition?**

The Aga Khan Museum is a branch of the Aga Khan Foundation, which is one of the charitable arms of the Aga Khan Development Network, which is a private and non-denominational organization. The Museum is dedicated to the arts of Islamic civilizations. Its mission is "to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the contribution that Muslim civilizations have made to world heritage. Through education, research, and collaboration, the Museum will foster dialogue and promote tolerance and mutual understanding among people." *Caravans of Gold* will build on this mission. The exhibition tells an expansive story about Islamic culture in the middle ages, highlighting the ways in which the shared practice of Islam and the Arabic language brought together diverse peoples, easing trade and cultural exchange.

### **14. When is the Opening?**

A free opening celebration on January 26th will feature African music, family activities, Gus Casely-Hayford, the Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and host of the BBC's *Lost Kingdoms of Africa*, as well as Guggenheim-award winning novelist, poet, essayist, screenwriter and playwright Chris Abani.

## Fast Facts

**Number of lenders: 32**

**Names of lenders by country:**

*Canada*

The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

*England*

The British Museum, London

*Mali*

Direction nationale du patrimoine culturel, Bamako  
Institut des hautes études et de recherches islamiques Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu  
Institut des sciences humaines, Bamako  
Musée national du Mali, Bamako

*Morocco*

Bank Al-Maghrib, Rabat Ministère de la culture et de la communication, Rabat  
National Museums Foundation of Morocco

*Nigeria*

National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Abuja

*United States*

Adler Planetarium, Chicago, IL  
American Numismatic Society, New York, NY  
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL  
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY  
Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern Libraries, Evanston, IL  
Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH  
Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY  
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI  
The Field Museum, Chicago, IL  
Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA  
Hispanic Society of America, New York, NY  
Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, NY  
Logan Museum of Anthropology, Beloit College, Beloit, WI  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA  
Loyola University Museum of Art, Chicago, IL  
Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Northwestern Libraries, Evanston, IL  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY  
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC  
Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology,

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA  
Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH  
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD

**Number of loans:**

More than 250 artworks; Nearly 100 fragments

**Number of Advisory Meetings:**

4 between 2013 and 2017 ( 1 at the Art institute of Chicago, 3 at The Block Museum)

**Number of trips to Africa:**

3 trips to Morocco, 2 trips to Nigeria, 4 trips to Mali