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The Block Museum celebrates January 26th opening of ‘Caravans of Gold’

EVANSTON, Ill. --- The Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University invites audiences to travel to a time when West African gold fueled expansive trade and drove the movement of people, culture and beliefs.

Opening Jan. 26, 2019, [“Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa”](#) is a first-of-its-kind exhibition that celebrates West Africa’s historic and underrecognized global significance and showcases the objects and ideas that were exchanged at the crossroads of West Africa, the Middle East, North Africa and Europe from the 8th to 16th centuries.

The opening celebration includes an open house event with hands-on artmaking, West African music and a program featuring Gus Casely-Hayford, director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, “Caravans of Gold” curator Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Nigerian-born author and Northwestern English professor Chris Abani.

[Reservations and more information are available online.](#)

“Caravans of Gold” continues through July 21, 2019 at The Block Museum, 40 Arts Circle Drive on the Evanston campus.

Supported in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Buffett Center for Global Studies, among many funding organizations, the groundbreaking exhibition will travel to Toronto’s Aga Khan Museum in Fall 2019 and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art in Spring 2020.

American literary scholar and cultural critic Henry Louis Gates Jr., host of the PBS series “Africa’s Great Civilizations,” said The Block Museum exhibition is significant and timely.

“This is a project that cannot be pigeon-holed as an ‘African exhibition,’” Gates said. “It reaches across boundaries and challenges conventional ideas about Africa, Islam and Medieval.

“The exhibition upends conventional historical narratives of the period by placing the Sahara and West Africa at the center,” he said. “It foregrounds how recent scholarship is compiling these points of reference to build a fuller and more nuanced picture of the period than we’ve ever had before. In doing so it disrupts the usual colonial narrative that begins with the onset of the Black Atlantic slave trade.”

“Caravans of Gold” draws on recent archaeological discoveries, including rare fragments from major medieval African trading centers like Sijilmasa in Morocco, and Gao and Tadmekka in Mali. These “fragments in time” are shown alongside works of art that invite audiences to imagine them as they once were. They are the starting point for a new understanding of the medieval past and for seeing the present in a new light.

Treasures of the Medieval Period

“Caravans of Gold” presents more than 250 artworks and fragments spanning types, styles and religious practices, representing more than five centuries and a vast geographic expanse. The works, both European and African, convey a story of the global networks and multi-directional trade at play in the medieval world.

To tell this little-known history, The Block Museum has secured rare and important loans from partner institutions in Mali, Morocco and Nigeria. Many of these objects have never traveled outside of their home countries. Some are among the greatest treasures of the medieval period in West Africa, including several rare manuscripts from libraries in Timbuktu.

The loans from Nigeria include iconic artworks -- such as a near life-size copper seated figure from Tada and a rope-entwined vessel from Igbo Ukwu -- that stand alongside the greatest works of art from any region or culture.

“Archaeologists’ site reports are full of enticing descriptions of material fragments uncovered in towns around the Sahara that were once thriving centers of trade; fragments of lusterware, glass vessels, glass beads, cast copperwork, iron work, terracotta and, occasionally, even goldwork have all been found at these sites,” said exhibition curator Kathleen Bickford Berzock, The Block Museum of Art’s associate director of curatorial affairs. “By placing these fragments alongside more familiar medieval works of art, ‘Caravans of Gold’ conjures an all but forgotten time and place.

“With the exhibition, we are inviting audiences to throw out their perceptions of medieval knights and castles and journey with us to a medieval world with Africa at its center,” Berzock said.

“Caravans of Gold” Opening Celebration

Jan. 26, 2019

10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Admission is free and open to all

The Block Museum of Art invites audiences to visit the museum for the historic opening of the exhibition and to take part in a story of art, culture and exchange that stretches from the medieval Sahara, across the globe and into our own time.

Open House: “Caravans and Crossroads: Art, Music and Stories”

10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

The Block Museum
40 Arts Circle Drive

Drop by the Block for an all-ages celebration inspired by “Caravans of Gold,” and be among the first to explore the exhibition. Join Chicago artist [Rhonda Wheatley](#) in a hands-on activity exploring the powerful stories that these objects tell. Experience live West African music and DJ sets throughout the museum featuring special guest, seventh-generation Jeli (griot) [Morikeba Kouyate](#). A master of the kora, a 21-string lute, Kouyate translates the oral history and legends from medieval West Africa to the present day.

Opening Program: with Chris Abani, Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Gus Casely-Hayford

2 p.m.

Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, 50 Arts Circle Drive

[RSVP](#)

Renowned speakers include Northwestern Board of Trustees Professor of English [Chris Abani](#), a Nigerian-born novelist, poet and essayist and winner of 2009 Guggenheim Award; [Gus Casely-Hayford](#), director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., and host of BBC’s “Lost Kingdoms of Africa.” They will be joined by “Caravans of Gold” curator [Kathleen Bickford Berzock](#). Picking up themes from the exhibition, the panel will discuss the relationships between history, power and imagination and ask what trans-Saharan exchange from the distant past can tell us about movement and migration today. [Jonathan Holloway](#), provost of Northwestern University and professor of history and African American studies, and [Annelise Riles](#), executive director of the Roberta Buffett Institute for Global Studies and associate provost for global affairs, will provide welcoming remarks.

This program is generously supported by The Alumnae of Northwestern University.

Impacting Education

Throughout its run, The Block Museum of Art will focus on using the “Caravans of Gold” exhibition as a site for impacting the teaching of African art and history.

Ongoing public tours of the exhibition will be held Tuesdays at noon and Sundays at 3 p.m. Free, private tours for schools and community groups can be scheduled through [The Block website](#).

A significant educational initiative supported in part by the Evanston Arts Council, will ensure that students throughout Evanston and the surrounding region have the opportunity to visit the exhibition as a site for learning about Africa's rich, global history.

"The exhibition repositions African states and peoples as not only embedded in, but central to global networks of exchange in the medieval world and challenges common notions of Africa as a place isolated from the rest of the world and without history," said Lisa Corrin, the Block Museum Ellen Phillips Katz Director.

"We will have students asking why this important history, these stories, are relatively unknown and untaught."

Related Events and Contemporary Ties

Isaac Julien: "The Leopard (Western Union: Small Boats)"

Jan. 26 to April 14, 2019

The Block Museum, Alsdorf Gallery

"Caravans of Gold" offers timely resonance with contemporary conversations of migration, movement, and global economy. In conjunction with "Caravans of Gold," the museum will dedicate its Alsdorf Gallery to the exhibition "Isaac Julien: The Leopard (Western Union: Small Boats)."

Presented for the first time in Chicago, this 2007 video installation by renowned British contemporary artist Isaac Julien presents a lyrical and visceral meditation on histories of African migration. The work, called a "refined fusion of politics, history and stunningly lush aesthetics" by Artforum, challenges viewers to contemplate the inequities of globalization and the cycles of violence and displacement that have bound Europe and Africa for centuries.

Contemporary Conversations

Feb. 7 - 8, 2019: Filmmaker Manthia Diawara [\[RSVP\]](#)

Feb. 13, 2019: Artist Michael Rakowitz [\[RSVP\]](#)

Feb. 28, 2019: Nations of Migrants panel [\[RSVP\]](#)

Contemporary conversations about migration and cross-cultural exchange will take place throughout The Block's winter 2019 season including "Avant Garde Africa," a two night event Feb. 7 and 8, 2019 with Malian filmmaker and cultural theorist [Manthia Diawara](#); "Counter-Histories," a conversation with the internationally-acclaimed artist [Michael Rakowitz](#), professor of art, theory and practice at Northwestern, on Feb. 13, 2019; and "Nations of Migrants" on Feb. 28, 2019, a program drawing on the

perspectives and first-hand experiences of economic migrants, international policy experts and humanitarian organizations.

For more information about “Caravans of Gold” and exhibition related events, visit [The Block Museum website](#).

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