

Press Release

Brooklyn Museum



The Brooklyn Museum Announces *African Arts—Global Conversations*

This exhibition presents diverse African works throughout the Museum's vast collections, putting African arts in its rightful place within the global art historical canon

On view February 14–November 15, 2020

African Arts—Global Conversations draws from the Brooklyn Museum's extensive and renowned collections to assert the importance of African arts within the art historical canon. Spanning the entire Museum, the exhibition questions dominant narratives from Western art history and museum practices that have traditionally sidelined African arts, and makes important connections between the continent's various artistic practices and those of other global cultural groups. Included in the exhibition are African artworks from a wide range of places and time periods, spanning circa 2300 B.C.E. to the present day, in conversation with collection objects from outside of Africa that share similar themes—from faith, race, and history to design, aesthetics, and style. For example, a Kuba artist's mask of Wóót is shown alongside Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington in the Luce Center for American Art, illustrating strategies artists used to represent community founders and origins. By considering the independent development of shared themes and ideas from different parts of the world, *African Arts—Global Conversations* uses a uniquely transcultural approach to

reconsider African art's relation to art from other regions, moving beyond the narrative that African arts were "discovered" by European modernists.

African Arts—Global Conversations is curated by Kristen Windmuller-Luna, Sills Family Consulting Curator, African Arts, Brooklyn Museum.

The exhibition starts with an introductory gallery adjacent to the Museum's lobby and continues throughout the Museum with groupings of works installed in galleries dedicated to collections for European Art, Arts of the Americas, American Art, Ancient Egyptian Art, and Arts of Asia. The introductory gallery includes examples of historical art history textbooks, illustrating the limited ways in which African arts have been included in the art historical canon, often appearing only as footnotes to European modernism. A snapshot of the larger exhibition, the seven groupings in the introductory gallery (including themes such as Feminisms, Multiple Modernisms, and Idealized Portraits) present major concepts and movements in art history, recasting them with an eye toward the African continent. *African Arts—Global Conversations* continues in other galleries in the Museum, exploring additional topics that include Crossroads: Orthodox Ethiopia and Catholic Italy, which pairs processional crosses from each kingdom, illustrating their historical connections and how the interpretation of the cross form varied across cultures; Might and Memory, which explores different expressions of power by contrasting sculptures dedicated to warriors from Ethiopia's Konso peoples with those from the Huastec peoples of modern day Mexico; and Iconoclasm, which considers, through the pairing of a pharaonic Egyptian portrait sculpture and a Kongo power figure (*nkisi*), how acts of destruction can also be acts of agency. Also included in the exhibition is a mask carved by a Fang artist paired with a portrait by Pablo Picasso, reassessing the Spanish artist's long relationship with African art and exploring his limited understanding of the continent's diverse artistic styles, while also presenting each artist's differing approach to images of women. American painter Beauford Delaney's engagement with Fang sculpture is considered as well, in the grouping African Arts and the Harlem Renaissance, which includes vintage books by Alain Locke and Carl Einstein.

The exhibition includes thirty-three artworks, highlighting several new acquisitions and never-before-exhibited works, among others. Of the twenty artworks by African artists, important objects include a celebrated eighteenth-century Kuba sculpture of a ruler that is the only one of its kind in the United States, fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Ethiopian Orthodox processional crosses, and a mid-twentieth-century Sierra Leonean Ordehlay or Jollay society mask. Also featured are paintings, ceramics, and collages by contemporary artists Atta Kwami, Ranti Bam, Magdalene Odundo OBE, and Taiye Idahor. African works in the exhibition are paired with works by Māori, Seminole, Spanish, American, Huastec, and Korean artists.

"Art has many histories, and the story of art cannot be told without Africa," said curator Kristen Windmuller-Luna. "There are more stories to tell about Africa's role in art history than about one-sided influence, and this exhibition seeks to reassert Africa's role in the narrative of art history. In today's world, it's crucial to promote a global understanding of art, one in which African arts—and other arts too often left out of the canon—are celebrated and included in the conversation."

The Brooklyn Museum has one of the country's largest and most important collections of African art and was the first museum in the United States to display African objects as works of art, in a landmark 1923 exhibition that explored the formal and aesthetic qualities of these objects for the first time. In anticipation of a thoughtful and dynamic future reinstallation of the Museum's collection galleries for African arts, *African Arts—Global Conversations* is developed as one of a series of temporary exhibitions that seek to consider, display, and research the collection in new ways. With provenance labels for every work (both African and non-African), the exhibition also gives the Museum an opportunity to engage in deeper

provenance research across the collection, allowing visitors to consider each object's historical purpose as well as the individual path it took to enter the Museum's collection.

The exhibition is complemented by a series of public programs and events.

Above, left: Kuba artist. *Mask (Mwaash aMbooy)*, late 19th or early 20th century. Rawhide, paint, plant fibers, textile, cowrie shells, glass, wood, monkey pelt, feathers, 22 x 20 x 18 in. (55.9 x 50.8 x 45.7 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund, 22.1582. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum) **Above, right:** Gilbert Stuart (American, 1755–1828). *George Washington*, 1796. Oil on canvas, 96 1/4 x 60 1/4 in. (244.5 x 153 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Dick S. Ramsay Fund and Museum Purchase Fund, 45.179. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)