

Kongo Across the Waters: Publication and Exhibition Research

SUSAN COOKSEY & ROBIN POYNOR



In the second year of preparation for the project “Kongo across the Waters,” a collaboration between the Harn Museum of Art and the Royal Museum for Central Africa, co-curators Robin Poynor, Hein Vanhee (researcher, RMCA) and Susan Cooksey, worked steadily on research and organization for the exhibition and publication. They consulted with some thirty scholars who specialize in Kongo and the Central Africa Diaspora who have also contributed chapters for the publication.

In February 2012, Poynor and Cooksey traveled to Washington, DC to view collections and meet with scholars at George Washington University, University of Maryland, and museum staff at the Smithsonian Museums of African Art, The American Indian, American Art, American History, African American History and Culture, and the Anacostia. In early March 2012, all three curators traveled to New Orleans where they met with artists, scholars, museum professionals, and bearers of culture to discuss the Kongo roots of music, dance, voodoo and other aspects of visual culture. Later that month, Poynor and Cooksey ex-

plored archives, museums, artists’ studios, historical sites and African American cemeteries in north Florida, Georgia and South Carolina. These investigations yielded fascinating links between Low-country African American culture and Kongo culture, including the production of coiled baskets, carved walking sticks, ceramic vessels, music and dance, and conjuration. In April, Poynor and Cooksey visited Fort Valley State University to seek more information about Phyllis Biggs, who was brought from the Congo to the US in the 1800s. They also viewed objects in the collection of the Tubman Museum in Macon, Georgia.

From May to June, Vanhee visited Gainesville to work with co-curators and Harn staff to assist with planning the exhibition and book. In July, Carlee Forbes, an art history graduate research assistant, traveled to Belgium to conduct research on the RMCA’s holdings of Kongo textiles, and view the current selection of objects for the exhibition. In August, the curators, assisted by Harn Director Rebecca Nagy, submitted an NEH proposal that would allow for enhanced programming and interpretation for the exhibition. The Harn also secured two travel venues for the exhibition at the Princeton

University Museum of Art (2014) and the New Orleans Museum of Art (2015). In September 2012, Poynor and Cooksey traveled to Miami to see the exhibition of José Bedia’s work, “Transcultural Pilgrim” at the Miami Museum of Art. They met with the artist and discussed his practice of Palo Mayombe and his experience in Zambia and Angola as inspiration for his art. They also visited The Little Haiti Cultural Center, founded by Haitian artist Edouard Duval Carrié, and viewed works in his studio. Both Duval Carrié and Bedia’s art will be featured in the exhibition. Nearby in Little Haiti, the curators explored botanicas and acquired paquets Congo and other materials for the exhibition.

The curators will be finalizing their research, conducting artist interviews in the U.S., and completing the manuscript in early 2013.



Susan Cooksey is curator of African Art at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art. Robin Poynor is professor of art history. Both are affiliate faculty in the Center for African Studies. Funding for exhibition research and travel was provided by the Harn Museum and a UF Faculty Enhancement Opportunity grant.