

Kongo Across the Waters: a Collaborative Exhibition of the Harn Museum of Art and the RMCA

SUSAN COOKSEY & ROBIN POYNOR

Robin Poynor and Susan Cooksey are planning an exhibition that explores the art and culture of the Kongo peoples of west Central Africa and Kongo cultural connections in the United States. The exhibition will be a collaborative project between the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. Cooksey and Poynor will work together with RMCA curators to define the themes of the exhibition, select objects and interpretive materials to be included, and produce the exhibition catalogue. In the last year, Poynor, Cooksey and Harn Museum Director Rebecca Nagy met with Dr. Guido Gryseels, and worked with the RMCA staff in Tervuren, viewing collections and making plans for the exhibition. Poynor, Cooksey and Nagy made a trip to the RMCA in July 2011 and Poynor and Cooksey returned in September 2011 to view objects and discuss the project with RMCA staff.

The proposed exhibition will look at Kongo art in Africa (in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Congo Republic, Cabinda, Gabon and Angola) and extend it to address the impact of Central African peoples and ideas—particularly from the Kongo region—in North America, both on culture more broadly and on art and visual culture specifically. The title “Kongo Across the Waters” has multiple meanings, both geographical and spiritual. Crossing the waters occurs as a constant theme in Kongo mythology, in stories of migration and in the conceptual journey towards the land of the ancestors. It also evokes the trans-Atlantic journey of Kongo peoples, and



is reiterated in African American beliefs. To arrive at the relationships between the Kongo coast and North American visual culture the curators will rely on a multi-disciplinary approach involving current research in the fields of history, archaeology, linguistics, musicology, anthropology and art history.

The exhibition will mark a milestone in the history of African presence in the Americas. The first Africans to arrive in what is now the United States, Juan Garrido and Juan Gonzalez Ponce de Leon, came to the Florida shore in April 1513 as free conquistadors who accompanied Juan Ponce de Leon. In 2013 Florida will commemorate 500 years of European presence, marking the arrival of Juan Ponce de Leon and his companions. The proposed exhibition will bring attention to this important historical event and will celebrate the subsequent impact of African cultural traditions in Florida and the United States, especially those of the Kongo peoples. Happily, the exhibition will also coincide with

the publication of Poynor’s book *Africa in Florida*, by the University Press of Florida.

The curators from the Harn Museum and the Royal Museum of Central Africa will collaborate on the selection of objects and archival materials from the RMCA, institutions in the United States, and private collections in Europe and America. Plans for the accompanying catalog include essays on specific themes written by scholars whose research focuses on Kongo culture. The proposed opening of the exhibition is fall 2013 in the Harn Museum’s Gladys Gracy Harn Exhibition Hall. The exhibition will be offered for travel to the RMCA in modified form, and then to major institutions in the United States.

Susan Cooksey is curator of African art at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art. Robin Poynor is professor in the School of Art and Art History. Cooksey and Poynor are both affiliate faculty members in the Center for African Studies.