

Research for “Kongo across the Waters” Exhibition and Publication

SUSAN COOKSEY, ROBIN POYNOR, HEIN VANHEE & CARLEE FORBES

On October 22, 2013, the exhibition “Kongo across the Waters,” opened at the Harn Museum of Art. From October 2012 to October 2013, Robin Poynor, Susan Cooksey and Hein Vanhee (Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren Belgium) and Carlee Forbes, (UF doctoral student in Art History) continued their research on Kongo art and culture and its influence on America for the exhibition and accompanying publication by the same title.

Poynor worked intensively with scholars in Louisiana, exploring the Kongo roots of Voodoo and American music. Poynor’s work with Ryan Gray, an archaeologist at the University of New Orleans, resulted in his essay on a rosary belonging to a Central African man whose remains were excavated in the oldest cemetery in New Orleans, dating to the 18th century. A re-interment ceremony for the remains will occur in conjunction with the travel of the exhibition to the New Orleans Museum of Art in 2015. The rosary is also on display in the exhibition. Poynor also traveled to New Orleans in September 2013 to produce a film investigating musical traditions with ethnomusicologist Freddi Williams-Evans. For another section of the film, Susan Cooksey worked with filmmaker Houston Wells and University of Florida students who direct and participate in the Florida Invitational Step Show. The film is currently on view in the exhibition. Carlee Forbes did research on textiles and ivories for the publication and exhibition didactics. She also helped with exhibition design including the composition of a photographic montage based on her research on African American art.

In fall 2013, Cooksey travelled to Charleston, SC to investigate archaeological artifacts from the site of Dean Hall plantation that have cross marks linking them to



Kongo cosmograms. She also interviewed coiled grass basketmakers who continue a 300 year tradition linked to Kongo basketmaking and worked with Dale Rosengarten of the College of Charleston whose work focuses on African roots of Gullah baskets.

Hein Vanhee made three visits to Gainesville in 2012-13 in preparation for the installation of the exhibition and continued research for the book. Together, the curators looked at African American cemeteries, yard shows, carving traditions and ceramics. In Belgium, Vanhee mined archives in the Royal Museum for Central Africa and worked with other scholars to investigate the histories of objects in the collection, find archival images from the 19th and early 20th century. He located music clips from Kongo that visitors can hear in the exhibition as they view related musical instruments. Vanhee delved into Kongo commerce and cultural exchanges in Africa and the Atlantic world, along with historian Jelmer Vos (Old Dominion University). Their co-authored article appears in the publication.

Rebecca Nagy, director of the

Harn Museum was also able to secure an additional venue for the exhibition at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Museum in Atlanta, Georgia from May through September 2014. Afterwards, the exhibition will travel to the Princeton University Museum of Art and then to the New Orleans Museum of Art, completing its tour in May 2015. The curators have also planned the annual Gwendolen M. Carter Conference for February 21- 22, 2014 that expanded on the theme of the exhibition by exploring Kongo influences in the Caribbean and South America.

Research by the curators was supported by the Office of the Provost, the International Center, the Center for African Studies, the College of Fine Arts, the School of Art and Art History, and contributions from private donors.